Advertising the European identity

Instagram analysis on the visual self-presentation of the European Parliament and the European Commission

Laura Cámara Castillo
University of Helsinki
Faculty of Social Sciences
Global Politics and Communication
Master's thesis
May 2019

HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Tiedekunta/Osasto Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty Faculty of Social Sciences	Laitos/Institution– Department Department of Social Research	
Tekijä/Författare – Author Laura Cámara Castillo		
Työn nimi / Arbetets titel – Title Advertising the European identity: Instagram analysis on the visual self-presentation of the European Parliament and the European Commission		
Oppiaine /Läroämne – Subject Global Politics and Communication – Media and Democracy		
Työn laji/Arbetets art – Level Master's Thesis	Aika/Datum – Month and year May 2019	Sivumäärä/ Sidoantal – Number of pages 76

Tiivistelmä/Referat – Abstract

The interactive features of social media platforms facilitate communication between political institutions and citizens and are said to enhance democracy by strengthening the public sphere. On the other hand, the commercialization of social networks and fragmentation of the public, together with the current mediatization of political communication, undermine the democratic possibilities of online platforms. Nowadays, the main social media platforms are owned by large US-based corporations with economic interests that often come into conflict with the public values promoted by EU institutions. Moreover, European institutions have the challenge of being often portrayed as non-transparent and remaining underrepresented in mass media. For that matter, analyzing how EU institutions present themselves on social media is relevant to understand which values they intend to promote and how do they interact with citizens, especially young people.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how the European Parliament and the European Commission use visual communication on Instagram to portray themselves and in which ways they use the interactive possibilities available in the Stories feature to communicate with citizens. In particular, this case study focuses on Instagram because it is a visually-centered social media platform, which allows analyzing the visual aspects of political communication fairly easily. Based on Habermas' concept of public sphere, the analysis also considers whether democratic deliberation is part of the communication strategy of European institutions.

Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis have been used as methods to assess the images and videos published on the Instagram accounts of the European Parliament and the European Commission during a period of 30 days, between January and February 2019. The clusters of analysis presented by Russmann and Svensson (2016), including perception, image management, integration and interactivity, have been selected as the main variables to analyze the content.

The results of the analysis suggest that the communication strategy of the European institutions on Instagram is rather based on one-directional and top-down communication, accordingly with the findings of previous research. The European Parliament and the European Commission mostly use Instagram to inform citizens about their policy and to promote European values, instead of engaging in democratic deliberation and strengthening political participation. Furthermore, the building of the European identity appears to be a central aspect of the communication strategy of the analyzed institutions, often together with personalization and explicit reference to users.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
European Union, Instagram, democratic deliberation, self-presentation, social media

Table of contents

List of figures

1. Introduction

1.1. Presentation of the topic and relevance of the research

In recent years, social media have become an essential part of political communication in Western democracies, at the same time that they have become one of the main platforms for communication and socialization, particularly among young people. Due to the increasing popularity of "identity-centric social media platforms", political actors and institutions have adopted social networks as part of their communication strategy (Klinger and Svensson, 2014: 1245; Lalancette and Raynauld, 2017: 6). The interactive features and the network structure of social media allow citizens and political institutions to communicate directly with each other, becoming less dependent on intermediaries such as mass media (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013: 320). Moreover, the technological characteristics of online platforms also make bringing political discussion outside of national contexts possible (Castells, 2008: 81). However, the most successful social media platforms are owned by "the Big Five", a few US based large corporations that dominate the online space while promoting "economic values and corporate interests, often at the expense of a (European) focus on social values and collective interests" (Van Dijk, Poell and de Waal, 2018: 32, 138).

Indeed, although the characteristics of social media make political communication more accessible, this does not always imply that those platforms improve democratic participation and access to information. Social media can also be used to expand disinformation, political propaganda and populist discourses. For example, during the Brexit referendum supporters were much more active than opponents spreading information on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. In another context, during the US 2016 presidential elections foreign online propaganda was said to play a big role in the election results. The impact of these discourses has become more amplified due to the current delegitimization of traditional political institutions (Persily, 2017: 64).

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how European institutions are portraying themselves and how do they communicate with citizens in the context of social media. The institutions that will be analyzed are the European Parliament and the European Commission, since they are the most active central EU institutions on Instagram. In particu-

lar, qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis will be used in order to analyze the images and videos posted by the mentioned accounts in their Instagram profiles.

Instagram is one of the most used social media platforms nowadays, currently owned by Facebook (Glantz, 2013: 694). Moreover, it is especially popular among young people (Liebhart and Bernhardt, 2017: 4; Smith and Anderson, 2008). However, political communication does not stand out among its uses, and therefore the platform has remained fairly unanalyzed in the field (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2017: 7; Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 2).

EU political actors, as well as institutions and organizations, have a strong presence in various social media platforms, including Instagram[1]. Due to the fact that analyses of political communication in the context of social media have focused mostly on actors at a national level, there is a lack of research about transnational and international institutions. European institutions are an interesting object of analysis because they are hierarchically structured political institutions, but still make use of social networks based on horizontal types of communication (European Commission, 2013: 11). Moreover, they have the challenge of being often portrayed as non-transparent and having remained underrepresented in mass media (Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013: 479-481). For that matter, having a better insight into how EU institutions present themselves on those platforms is relevant in order to understand which values they intend to promote and how do they interact with young citizens.

Specifically, this thesis will focus on Instagram, since it is a social media platform based mostly on the publication of visual content, which will be at the center of this analysis. Although images and videos have also gained relevance in other major social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, they are not the central aspect of those platforms, which are still rather text-based. Studying political communication on Instagram allows focusing on the visual self-representation of the institutions, instead of on the visual framing of mass media, which has been the main focus of previous research about the role of visuality in political communication (Filmanov, Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 2). In Lalancette and Raynauld's words, "visual content is becoming a central component of formal political players' digital political communication, mobilization, and persuasion arsenal" (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2017: 3).

[1]EU social media accounts: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact/social-networks_en

Undoubtedly, pictures and videos can help influence the way citizens view political institutions and may affect the public opinion about them (Filmanov et al. 2016: 3). On the other hand, the interactive possibilities of social media make it easier for institutions to engage in conversation with citizens, and communicate directly without the need of intermediaries such as mass media; accordingly, institutions can decide how they want to reshape their own image (Marland, 2012: 215-217). Particularly nowadays, when visual and audiovisual content is gaining more relevance and social media platforms have consolidated as mainstream communication platforms for political actors, analyzing how political institutions make use of Instagram is crucial in order to be able to interpret what image they are trying to portray and in which ways do they engage with citizens (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 1-2).

In order to assess the role of Instagram in political communication, it is crucial to understand how the Internet and social media are shaping political communication and vice versa. For that reason, two broader theoretical perspectives regarding the democratic role of online platforms have been identified, which will be further explored in the theoretical framework chapter of this thesis. The first perspective claims that the transformative power of the Internet is limited in terms of how it affects politics, since political communication online merely reflects the power structures offline. In Dahlgren's words, "while the major political actors may engage in online campaigning, lobbying, policy advocacy, organizing, and so forth, this perspective underscores that there does not seem to be any major political change in sight" (Dahlgren, 2005: 154).

The second perspective views the Internet as a central platform to develop an online public sphere, with new types of democratic participation more tied to citizen advocacy and social movements. The main argument of this perspective is that the Internet fosters horizontal types of communication and makes citizen interactions between themselves and with political actors more accessible (Dahlgren, 2005: 154-155). In a similar way, Loader and Mercea identify two phases in the research on political communication online: a "first wave of enthusiasm for internet-based visions of digital democracy" and a second wave in which rational deliberation is replaced for "identity politics" and networking between citizens (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 757-758).

According to Liebhart and Bernhardt, the changes that social media has fostered in political communication can be summarized in three levels. At an organizational level,

there has been a considerable increase in the costs of campaigns due to their professionalization and need to be in a constant campaign mode. At the level of content, social media algorithms make it possible for political communication to become more personalized and individualized. Finally, at a technological level, social networks make communication more accessible: politicians and institutions can communicate directly with citizens, without the need to use traditional mass media (Liebhart and Bernhardt, 2017: 2-3). In the following chapters of this thesis, the effects of these changes, in particular at the level of content, will be assessed regarding political communication on social media, and specifically in relation with the self-representation of European institutions on Instagram.

1.2. Research questions

The research questions that will be examined within this thesis are the following:

1. *In which ways do European political institutions use Instagram to communicate with citizens and how do they portray themselves on the platform?*
2. *What are the differences, in terms of content, between the use of the Stories function and the regular posts?*
3. *How do the interactive features of Instagram affect the institutions' democratic deliberation with users?*

The aim of the first question is to analyze the content posted by the European Parliament and the European Commission in a way that shows their particular manner of communicating on Instagram. Instagram is a platform mainly used by young people: according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, in the US approximately 71% of Instagram users are between 18 and 24 years old (Smith and Anderson, 2008: 24). Although there is no data on the European context, this report gives an idea of which age groups use the social media platform the most. It will indeed be interesting to observe if the European political institutions present themselves in ways engaging for young people. Other relevant features to take into consideration will be whether the European institutions use Instagram to broadcast information or mobilize users, if there is personalization in the content they post, and if values of European identity are noticeable in the content, among other aspects.

The second research question is also rather empirical and refers specifically to the particular purposes for which the institutions use Stories (content available for 24 hours) and regular posts on their Instagram profiles. Political uses of the Stories function have not been analyzed yet, despite it being one of the most widely used features on Instagram both by individual users and organizations (Statista, 2008). In fact, the analyzed European institutions published Stories almost on a daily basis during the data collection period. Moreover, the Stories function includes various interactive features which are not available in regular posts, but that are interesting to analyze from a perspective of political communication. For instance, Stories offer the possibility to add polls, questions and ratings to the content, among other elements, that political institutions may use to interact with citizens and receive direct feedback from users. For those reasons, analyzing the use of Stories of the European Parliament and the European Commission, in comparison with regular posts, is highly relevant in order to assess how these political institutions use Instagram to communicate with citizens.

Finally, the aim of the third research question is to determine whether the analyzed institutions are making use of the interactive possibilities of Instagram in order to engage in democratic deliberation with young citizens, or whether they are otherwise using Instagram as a mere advertising platform. This question is therefore rather theoretically motivated. In this context, the concept of democratic deliberation is understood as the process of meaningful political discussion between citizens and institutions that takes place in the public sphere. Democratic deliberation is characterized by its "reflexive character", meaning that all actors that take part in the discussion (both government and citizens) can reconsider their attitude towards the public opinions and respond to them (Habermas, 2006: 417). According to this perspective, I consider social media to have democratic possibilities, therefore having the potential to constitute a public sphere. This does not imply that commercial interests are disregarded as an important part of social media, or that these platforms cannot entail other types of communication which are not democratic by nature. However, in this research project I want to highlight how the interactive possibilities of social media platforms make it possible to include democratic deliberation within its usages. The interactive potential of Instagram will be further described in the third section of this thesis, along with other relevant characteristics of the social network.

In order to examine the above presented research questions, images and videos published on Instagram by the European Parliament and the European Commission, as well as their captions, have been collected during a period of 30 days and analyzed using qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. These methods have been selected because they are adaptable to the research questions of this thesis and allow exploring the content in depth. Finally, the data sample includes both regular posts and Stories, which have been coded for analysis according to the four variables presented by Russmann and Svensson in their article *Studying Organizations on Instagram* (2016). These variables, which will be defined in the methodology and data chapter, include perception, image management, integration and interactivity.

1.3. Structure of the research

This research project consists of six chapters, including this introductory section. In the following chapter, the theoretical background for the research will be developed. First of all, the concept of public sphere will be defined. Secondly, different theories about political communication in social media will be presented. Two main perspectives will be discussed; on the one hand the democratic role of social media as a public sphere, and on the other hand the commercial interests and risks of disinformation that those platforms entail.

The third chapter will consist in a brief overview of previous research about the social media communication strategies of European institutions. The fourth chapter, methodology and data, will start with a discussion on the relevance of Instagram as a research platform and visual communication as a relevant approach for conducting research in political communication. Subsequently, the research design and the methods of analysis will be presented, and the processes of data collection and analysis will be described in detail. Furthermore, the methodology section will discuss the validity and reliability of the research project, and possible ethical considerations of performing content analysis on social media.

In the analysis part, the fifth chapter of the thesis, the findings of the data analysis will be displayed and explained, according to the coding schemes defined in the previous section. The analysis will focus on different aspects of perception, image management,

integration and interactivity of the content published by the European Commission and the European Parliament on their Instagram profiles.

The last section of this thesis will be the discussion of the results and conclusions. In this chapter, the most relevant findings from the analysis will be discussed in relation with the research questions. Moreover, the contributions and limitations of the research will be exposed, along with recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The concept of public sphere

Jürgen Habermas defined the public sphere as a space of interaction between citizens and political institutions in democratic states. Processes of democratic deliberation are rather intersubjective, and take place in the shape of formal political discussion as well as in the informal networks of the public sphere (Habermas, 1994: 7-8). On the one hand, political institutions that hold the administrative power take into account the demands of citizens, organized in the form of public opinion, in order to take decisions and develop policies (Habermas, 1994: 8-9). On the other hand, in the government context, public opinions "set the frame" for which issues are relevant to citizens and which decisions they would consider legitimate (Habermas, 2006: 418). Social media are an interesting example from the perspective of the public sphere since they make possible informal discussion among citizens, and at the same time facilitate the process of communication between democratic institutions and civil society, without the need for any intermediaries such as mass media.

The two conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to have a public sphere are a transparent and independent media, and "an inclusive civil society" which allows all citizens to participate in the public discussion on equal measure. However, in contemporary Western societies there is a lack of such characteristics. In Habermas' words, "the literature on 'public ignorance' paints a rather sobering portrait of the average citizen as a

largely uninformed and disinterested person" (Habermas, 2006: 420). Habermas identifies two main problems that negatively affect the deliberation process in the public sphere. Firstly, the fact that some citizens are socially and culturally excluded is directly related to the fact that opportunities of access and participation in mediated communication are unequal. Secondly, the fact that market logic leads the communication processes in the public sphere is affecting the structure and discourse of media. Mass media fosters attitudes of apathy and indifference by presenting content "of a degenerating kind of political communication itself", which is based on entertainment: trends such as personalization, simplification, dramatization and polarization are all part of this marketing framing of political issues present in the media (Habermas, 2006: 421-422). Moreover, in Dahlgren's view, "the political and politics are not simply given, but are constructed via word and deed", and therefore public discussion may or may not take the form of deliberation (Dahlgren, 2005: 158).

2.1.1. Public space vs. public sphere

The concept of public sphere should not be confused with the notion of public space, especially in the online context. It is particularly relevant to distinguish both concepts when researching political communication on social media, because the interactive features of social networks can be easily identified as promoting the creation of a public sphere, while in many cases they merely constitute a public space. When referring to the Internet as a public space, it is understood as a "forum for political deliberation". However, as a public sphere the Internet does not only facilitate political discussion, but also promotes "a democratic exchange of ideas" (Papacharissi, 2002: 11). What distinguishes each one from the other is the fact that the public sphere serves as a mediator between society and the State, in which the public opinion is formed by rational deliberation of a "reasoning public" (Habermas in Papacharissi, 2008: 5). On the other hand, in a public space individuals solely express their opinions.

Similarly to discussions in real life, virtual political debates are often dominated by a few and do not have a relevant impact on "public policy formation" (Papacharissi, 2002: 13). That implies that online platforms are merely additional spaces for political expression, and do not have the potential of changing the structure of the current political system. In Papacharissi's words, "greater participation in political discussion does not automatically result in discussion that promotes democratic ideals" (Papacharissi, 2002:

16). For example, it is true that social networks facilitate direct interaction and discussion between political actors or institutions and citizens, but that does not necessarily entail that all political interactions on social media are democratic.

The features of the public space are indeed necessary for the existence of a public sphere: the public space facilitates the creation of a public sphere by promoting political discussion between citizens and representatives and providing a better access to information. However, these features do not always guarantee "a healthy public sphere" (Papacharissi, 2008: 5). Not all citizens have equal access to ICTs and, even if they do have access to them, that does not imply that they are more informed or that they have a higher level of civic engagement and are willing to participate in political processes (Papacharissi, 2002: 22-23; 2008: 8-9). According to Papacharissi, the online space is currently a public space, but not a public sphere: it does provide opportunities for political deliberation; however it does not "promote a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions", and tends to reflect the power structures which are already present offline (Papacharissi, 2002: 11).

The reasons why the transition from a public space to a public sphere has not happened can be summarized in three elements, which Papacharissi describes as "access to information, reciprocity of communication, and commercialization" (Papacharissi, 2008: 12). Regarding the access to information, although initially digital media was thought to enhance direct democracy through "the deliberative discourse of public affairs", later research indicated that citizens still inform themselves online through websites of traditional mass media organizations, rather than "Internet based news organizations" (Papacharissi, 2008: 16-17). Regarding the reciprocity in online media, although this feature allows further interaction between citizens, politicians and institutions, "uses of digital media by politicians and the media tend to be one-directional and do not sustain feedback channels for the digital public or enable substantive citizen involvement" (Papacharissi, 2008: 17-18). Politicians and institutions, therefore, tend to use online media merely to support their own agendas and objectives. Finally, regarding the commercialization of digital media, it is inevitable that these media become commoditized and commercialized as they are part of the capitalist market and mostly owned by large corporations (Papacharissi, 2008: 21).

2.2. Political communication online

Political communication as a research field emerged in the US during the first half of the 20th century, in close relation with the development of mass media and communication studies. The existence of a free press and an informed civil society were considered necessary aspects for a healthy democracy already at the beginnings of political communication. During the first decades, research tended to concentrate on studying propaganda and its effects, especially since it developed within the context of the 1st and 2nd World Wars, in which propaganda had an important role (Rogers, 2004: 4). For example, Lasswell and Doob explored in which ways governments used persuasive means of communication to "influence public opinion". On the other hand, Lippmann focused on the effects that the press and the government had on public opinion, and on the consequences of the agenda-setting in political processes (Lin, 2004: 70-71).

Within the last century, television in the 1950s and the Internet in the 1990s represented a big change of channels of political communication. However, although the platforms of communication have shifted noticeably, the processes of interaction and political persuasion have remained similar (Rogers, 2004: 3). Due to the visual features of television, "in which faces are more easily recognizable by and accessible to mass audiences than abstract arguments about policies", broadcasting media promoted a change of the political discourse from beliefs and ideas to "personalities and spectacle", therefore contributing to the "depoliticization" of politics. Broadcast communication has also trespassed the public domain of political communication, by bringing it in the private space of "the living room". Moreover, television promoted the further professionalization of political communication, necessary to adapt the image and discourse of political actors to the broadcast medium (Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 166-167).

As it is the case with new media, in its origins television was said to have a big contribution in the creation of a "more informed, inclusive, and nonpartisan democracy" (Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 164). Indeed, early research about political communication on the broadcast medium proved that citizens were more informed regarding campaign and policy issues. However, as television became settled, the medium started becoming more dependant and, at the same time, necessary for politics, allowing political actors to gain more control over their messages (Gurevitch et al. 2009: 165).

As in the start of television, the arrival of the Internet has prompted both optimistic and skeptical views. On the one side, some consider the online space beneficial for democracy since it enhances political participation; while at the same time, skeptics consider it just a tool to reinforce already existing political communication mechanisms (Tedesco, 2004: 507-508). One of the main features of the Internet that differentiates if from traditional mass media is that it allows citizens to communicate and access information without time or space limitations. It is an appealing medium for political actors and organizations because it represents a "source-controlled" communication channel, which is cheaper than advertisements and offers unlimited space to express themselves and share political information (Tedesco, 2004: 510). Nonetheless, the current media structure may present a threat to the existence of an online public sphere. Mass media, and especially television, has been said to contribute to "public cynicism" and to a decrease in traditional political functions "such as party alignment and voting", so applying the broadcast model to the online context does not necessarily mean that citizens would become more engaged and active in politics (Tedesco, 2004: 516).

With the arrival of the Internet in the field of political communication, more information is available to citizens; therefore values such as professionalization, pluralism and citizen involvement are gaining relevance (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013: 18). It is important for political actors, such as democratic institutions, to be available to portray these values to the public in order to appear more reliable and transparent. In many cases, this is achieved by using politicians' "celebrity appeal" and portraying a more personal image, while making use of communication techniques from popular culture, such as marketing and entertainment. At the same time, there is a growing trend in campaigning and in news media to focus on individual politicians, rather than on institutions and policies (Loader, Vromen and Xenos, 2016: 405). According to Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, the online space has allowed the expansion of the range of political sources, by including aspects such as celebrity behavior or reality TV conflicts, and at the same time departing from formal politics and professionalized political communication (Gurevitch et al. 2009: 171-172). The following quote summarizes the effects of the new media landscape for political actors:

> The digital text is never complete; the fluidity of bits and bytes makes digital communication radically different from broadcasting. In the context of political communication, this has entailed a profound shift in the process of message cir-

> culation. Whereas political actors were once concerned to produce polished, finished performances for public consumption, contemporary politicians are compelled to think about interactive audiences and their capacity to question, challenge, redistribute, and modify the messages that they receive. In the era of digital interactivity, the production of political messages and images is much more vulnerable to disruption at the point of reception. (Gurevitch et al. 2009: 171)

Interactivity is not new, nor a feature exclusive to the Internet; it already existed in mass media, for example in the form of radio phone-ins in the context of television and radio. However, interactivity is a central aspect of digital media, and defines its characteristics as a multi-directional communication platform. Moreover, as much as interactivity affects political communication online, so does the possibility to modify messages and content in the online space (Gurevitch et al. 2009: 171-172).

While in the past, political communication unfolded in the limited spaces of press, television and radio, strategists are nowadays involved in "multidimensional impression management", since political actors have to be present in many different "spaces of mediation". In this new situation, politicians and governments have less control on the political agenda, to which they have to be "increasingly responsive". Political actors also have to adapt to a very wide, dynamic and uncertain media environment. Finally, the interactive features of communication online have promoted further discussion between political actors, such as institutions and citizens (Gurevitch et al. 2009: 173-174).

2.2.1. The democratic role of social media

2.2.1.1. The online public sphere

In the 1990s, discussions about the decrease of the quality of democracy were developing at the same time than discussions about the "media revolution" of the Internet. In that context, some started viewing these new technologies as possible solutions for encouraging democratic values and developing new forms of democratic participation closer to citizens (Dahlgren, 2005: 150). Early studies of digital democracy, therefore, tended to focus on the deliberative and participatory possibilities of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Mark Poster was one of the first to apply the concept of public sphere in the online context, as the following quotation demonstrates:

> To frame the issue of the political nature of the Internet in relation to the concept of the public sphere is particularly appropriate because of the spatial metaphor

> associated with the term. Instead of an immediate reference to the structure of an institution, which is often a formalist argument over procedures, or to the claims of a given social group, which assumes a certain figure of agency that I would like to keep in suspense, the notion of a public sphere suggests an arena of exchange. (Poster, 1995: 5)

In a similar way, Shirky considers the Internet as a communication platform supporting the public sphere and civil society, because of its participation, networking and informing characteristics. The concept of "environmental", applied to the online space, is related to the fact that "positive changes in the life of a country, including pro-democratic regime change, follow, rather than precede, the development of a strong public sphere" (Shirky, 2011: 17-18). In Shirky's view, public opinion is based on media and conversation; it is the step in which the opinions are shared between people that is most relevant for the formation of public opinions, and in which the Internet has a major role (Shirky, 2011: 19).

Manuel Castells embraced the democratic qualities of social media platforms, by transposing the concept of public sphere to the context of the Web 2.0. Based on Habermas' theory of democracy, he defines the public sphere as "the space where people come together as citizens and articulate their autonomous views to influence the political institutions of society" (Castells, 2008: 78-79). According to Castells, communication networks such as social media are, therefore, part of the public sphere. Furthermore, the technological characteristics of ICTs allow, among other things, creating a global public sphere that brings the political discussion out of the national context (Castells, 2008: 81).

Following the discourse theory proposed by Habermas, therefore, social media may be considered as an "informal network" part of the public sphere, in which citizens can articulate their demands. Moreover, in this view, social media platforms may foster democratic processes further than traditional means of communication, because they are also channels of direct interaction between the civil society and the political administration. In the context of institutional communication, social media can be defined as "a group of technologies that allow public agencies to foster engagement with citizens and other organizations using the philosophy of Web 2.0." (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013: 320).

Even though he does not specifically focus on social media, Dahlberg identifies three different frames in relation with the use of the Internet for democratic purposes. First of all, a communitarian frame "which stresses the possibility of the Internet enhancing communal spirit and values". Secondly, a liberal-individualist frame "which sees the Internet as assisting the expression of individual interests". The third type is the deliberative frame, based on Habermas' theory, "which promotes the Internet as the means for an expansion of the public sphere of rational-critical citizen discourse" (Dahlberg, 2001: 616).

Although Dahlberg, as well as Loader and Mercea, view the fact that political sites tend to be owned by corporations or governments as a threat to the democratic opportunities that the Internet offers, they also consider that this should not overshadow the democratic possibilities of social media and the potential it has to "re-configure communicative power relations", offering more possibilities of media production to citizens (Dahlberg, 2001: 619; Loader and Mercea, 2011: 758). In particular, Dahlberg sees an opportunity for advancing online democracy in deliberative sites, such as citizen led initiatives, which extend the public sphere by "stimulating reflexivity, fostering respectful listening and participant commitment to ongoing dialogue, achieving open and honest exchange, providing equal opportunity for all voices to be heard, and maximizing autonomy from state and corporate interests" (Dahlberg, 2001: 627-628).

Finally, Loader and Mercea argue that an open conception of "democratic citizenship", recognizing that there can exist multiple identity positions of citizens, may consider that social media is positive for democratic participation in the sense that these platforms enable political engagement in the private space of communication. However, there is also skepticism to the fact that politics should be broadened to that extent. In a more traditional view of democracy and citizenship, social media can be seen to undermine "rational deliberation", promoting populist discourses and the sensationalization of politics (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 761-762).

2.2.1.2. Democratic deliberation on social media

In many occasions, the democratizing potential of the Internet is related with characteristics of the online space that enhance further participation, more equality and less hierarchy. This approach is based on theories of participatory democracy and deliberative democracy, rather than on representative democracy. According to Storsul, "democratic

deliberation implies that more dialogue and less hierarchy may strengthen the collective shaping of politics through persuasive argument" (Storsul, 2014: 18-19). This view is based on Habermas' theory of public sphere, according to which all citizens should have the same opportunities to take part in democratic deliberation processes (Habermas, 2006: 421-422).

While mass media, namely broadcast and press, facilitate the circulation of information and political deliberation, citizen participation in political processes on them is rather limited. On the other hand, the attributes of the Internet allow further direct interaction between equal users; to some extent, the online space decreases the "hierarchical distance" between ordinary citizens and political institutions. Most ideas about the potential of Internet for increasing participation and deliberation online also concern social media services. However, there are two aspects exclusive of social media which reinforce democratic deliberation: inclusiveness and integration between mass media and personal media (Storsul, 2014: 19).

Social media are inclusive in the sense that they involve different social roles. On the same platform, citizens can discuss diverse topics and present themselves in different manners. The inclusiveness of social media relates to the concept of public sphere proposed by Habermas, in the sense that they represent spaces in which democratic deliberation is possible. Nonetheless, social networks are not only used for public communication, but also for private purposes; they integrate both personal and mass media. Mass media are characterized by being asymmetrical, in the sense that one-way communication is predominant. On the other hand, personal media, such as telephones and e-mail are more symmetrical, because they allow communication between individuals in private and non-institutional contexts. In social media, both types of communication are present: institutional actors can communicate with larger audiences, but users can also interact with each other individually (Storsul, 2014: 19-20).

These two features are relevant for political participation and democratic deliberation at three different levels. Firstly, social media enable more people to participate in political processes and discussion, and those platforms are also useful for political actors to mobilize citizens, due to their inclusiveness. Secondly, social media facilitate deliberation by "reducing hierarchies" between institutions and citizens. Thirdly, users of social media platforms have to present themselves according to different social roles. In Storsul's

words, “the integration of communication forms and collapsed social contexts may, however, make such participation and deliberation complicated” (Storsul, 2014: 21).

2.2.2. The downsides of social media

Although, in 2005, Dahlgren embraces the democratic possibilities that the Internet provides for developing and transforming the public sphere, he is also aware that there are limitations in the deliberative characteristics of online communication, since the Internet is developing within the commercialization and market-logic model of traditional media, and political discussion itself does not always entail a deliberative and civic character. Political uses of the Internet are very limited in comparison to other purposes the online space is used for, such as entertainment, consumerism, etc. Furthermore, the digital divide still exists, even within Western democracies, and although the Internet facilitates the development of a more heterogenic type of political communication, this also leads to the fragmentation of the public sphere. In short, even though online spaces, such as social networks, offer possibilities for new forms of interaction between institutions and citizens as well as political participation, this impact should not be misunderstood as “a quick fix for democracy”, since interactions and communication on social media platforms are still very much shaped by the economic interests of the corporations that own them (Dahlgren, 2005: 151-152). In the following pages, the issues mentioned here will be further explored.

2.2.2.1. Commercial interests

According to Dahlgren, the public sphere does not equal democracy, since democracy does not only entail deliberation and information, but also a “structural connection” across the spaces in which interaction between citizens and institutions takes place and the actual political processes of decision making (Dahlgren, 2005: 152-153). The current political system is very influenced by capitalist interests, and so is communication online. The main communication platforms on the Internet, including social networks, are characterized by being commercially oriented; although the Internet does provide opportunities for more democratic forms of expression, new technologies “cannot single-handedly transform a political and economic structure that has thrived for centuries” (Papacharissi, 2002: 20). Dahlberg stresses that already present social conditions in the offline context also affect political participation online. For example, Internet costs and

computing skills are some of the inequalities that undermine participation in the online public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001: 628).

Something that should be taken into consideration when analyzing the impact of online media in political communication is the fact that online platforms such as social media were not created with the main purpose to foster democratic values and promote political deliberation; they are tools used for many different purposes, such as marketing and entertainment. Since social networks are neither democratic nor undemocratic by nature, they can be used either to promote democracy or undermine it, depending on the political context (Persily, 2017: 74-75; Tucker et al. 2017: 48). In that sense, Fuchs criticizes the adoption of the concept of public sphere proposed by Habermas in the context of the Internet and social media, since these interpretations focus on "political and cultural communication", but do not take into account the material and political economic aspects of online communication, by asking for example who owns social media platforms (Fuchs, 2014: 57-58).

Even though the Internet offers citizens the possibility of engaging in political discussion, the effect of their opinions is quite limited, since "visibility on the Internet can be purchased and centralized". Therefore, actors that are already in a position of power such as states and large companies will find it much easier than civil society to spread their messages online (Fuchs, Boersma, Albrechtslund, and Sandoval, 2012: 14). This situation is clear when looking at the "highly asymmetrical ownership structure" of the most popular web 2.0 online sites and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Google. Most of them are owned by large corporations which make profit out of users' data; they are not only communicative services, but also advertising agencies (Fuchs, 2014: 80). Indeed, the online space is dominated by the "Big Five platform corporations", a group formed by the US based tech companies Alphabet-Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft (Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, 2018: 12).

The above presented corporations shape the technological infrastructure, economic model and ideological orientation of the online ecosystem, and decide the ways in which platforms, institutions and users interact with each other (Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, 2018: 32). For example, in the case of Instagram, the social network was purchased by Facebook in 2012. Nowadays, Facebook owns 80% of "social networking services" and, together with Google, control more than 60% of online advertising and

online identification services, such as Facebook Login. Finally, Facebook has also acquired considerable control over users' information through different mobile applications, including Instagram (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 13). In this context, political actors have to adapt their online discourse to the characteristics of Facebook. Although there is no formal restriction to new platforms in the current ecosystem, the fact that it is dominated by the "Big Five infrastructural platforms" makes extremely difficult for competition to enter the market without becoming dependent on the services already created by these corporations (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 15).

The platform ecosystem created by the "Big Five" companies may seem to replace top-down with bottom-up communication; however it does so "by means of a highly centralized structure which remains opaque to its users" (Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, 2018: 12). For instance, unlike traditional mass media such as television and radio, the Internet, and especially social media, offers users the possibility to become more active through its "many-to-many" type of communication. However, in the online context, users are not merely consumers or producers; instead they are "prosumers", meaning that they are able to do both activities on the same platforms and the difference between them is becoming more blurred. The "prosumer commodity" of the Internet does not imply that online media are more participatory or democratic than traditional media, but that "human creativity" is becoming more commoditized. State and corporate power are exercised online, "through the gathering, combination, and assessment of personal data that users communicate over the web to others" (Fuchs, 2012: 56-58).

Undoubtedly, the commodification of social media affects how political communication unfolds in the online context, as well as the other way around. For instance, institutions and politicians are able to target specific messages to different audiences by using real-time analytics, which provide information about users' preferences and popular topics which are being discussed on social networks (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 35). Moreover, as individual and institutional users use social media platforms to promote themselves, this also intensifies the data traffic and subsequently the commodification of data on those platforms, which is transformed into economical value through personalized advertising and transaction fees. In van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal's words, "while user commodification and platform commodification mutually reinforce each other, there is clearly a huge disparity in power relations". Platform operators control the flows of data and al-

gorithms which shape communicative processes through their infrastructures, so they can also decide the economic model they want to impose (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 40).

Social media are part of the current process of "liquefaction" of society, according to which the distinctions between private life and public life, for instance work time and leisure time, are becoming more blurred. The liquefaction process has emerged due to certain developments in society, such as the trends towards globalization, the increased mobility of people and information, the deregulation of employment and the flexibility of production (Fuchs, 2014: 75). In that context, how are social networks related to the process of liquefaction? Firstly, "social media enable the convergence of the three modes of sociality (cognition, communication, cooperation) into an integrated form of sociality". For example, a user of a certain social network can create and publish content on the platform (cognitive level), which other users can comment on (communicative level) and manipulate to create new content (cooperative level). Secondly, another feature of social media which relates to the liquefaction process of society is the fact that most platforms integrate different social roles, in the sense that social networks "are based on the creation of personal profiles that describe the various roles of a human being's life", such as friends, citizens, workers, etc. Furthermore, the process of liquefaction has also blurred the boundaries between public and private spaces in political communication (Fuchs, 2014: 77).

The fact that social media are communicative platforms with economic interests, and that their characteristics promote the liquefaction of society, has consequently created three antagonisms at an economical, political and social level. The first one is the economic antagonism between users' data protection and the demands of tax accountability of the corporations, and the economic interests of social media corporations and their lack of transparency. The second antagonism is the political antagonism between users' privacy and demand of institutional accountability, and the "secrecy of power" and "surveillance-industrial complex" of the institutions. Finally, there is a third antagonism at the level of civil society between "the creation of public spheres and the corporate and state colonization of these public spheres" (Fuchs, 2014: 83-89).

In short, although social media have the potential to become a public sphere, this ability is limited by the political and corporate powers which control and monitor users' data in these platforms (Fuchs, 2014: 89). Institutional users, such as the European Commission

and the European Parliament, have to build their image in the current platform ecosystem due to the extended popularity of US-based social media platforms (especially among young people). While, traditionally, institutions have had their own ethical criteria, professional routines and formal procedures to shape their communication strategy, in the current context they have to adapt to new online platforms which challenge those procedures by means of commodification and selection techniques. This situation has brought numerous issues to political communication in democratic states, such as privacy concerns and a decline of ethical integrity and public values (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 47). It is therefore crucial to understand to which extent the current configuration of the platform ecosystem in the context of social media is affecting the public values of European institutions.

2.2.2.2. Fragmentation and manipulation of the public

Democratic institutions, such as governments, are increasingly "reliant upon the corporate platform ecosystem" which dominates the online space. Therefore, it should be in the public interest to consider how these platforms could be used to enhance democratic values (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 146). Besides regulating social media platforms, institutional actors can also uphold public values as users and developers of platforms (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 156). However, Poell and de Waal recognize that this can be a challenging task in the current context:

> Governments and publicly funded organizations function as exemplary users of platforms that should be held to the highest standards of transparency and accountability. If government workers select corporate platforms to use in professional contexts, they are supposed to align their choices with reigning public values in their field. In the current platform ecosystem, though, they often have no choice but to succumb to built-in mechanisms, triggering fundamental questions about conflicting values. (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 159)

Although political institutions may use social media platforms to enhance democratic values, the features of those platforms may not always support the same values. Indeed, beneficial aspects of the Internet for democracy, such as the possibilities it provides for promoting alternative and anti-establishment discourses, can also be a risk. As social networks become a means of expression for groups whose views are usually excluded from mainstream media and politics, not only "prodemocratic forces" use them to hold governments accountable, but authoritarian regimes also use online platforms to spread

their own propaganda, or directly censor them. More recently, “illiberal and antisystem forces” within democratic states, such as populists and demagogues, have started using tools of participation in the online space similar to those of authoritarian regimes to spread misinformation and manipulate public opinions, with the purpose of expanding their own discourses (Tucker et al. 2017: 47-48). Those tools include, among others, foreign intervention in elections and the prominence of fake news, which are made possible by the “anonymity and lack of accountability” of online speeches (Persily, 2017: 71). Persily summarizes the challenges that the Internet poses for democracy in the following way:

> The politics of never-ending spectacles cannot be healthy for a democracy. Nor can a porousness to outside influences that undercuts the sovereignty of a nation’s elections. Democracy depends on both the ability and the will of voters to base their political judgments on facts, or at least on strong intermediary institutions that can act as guardrails to channel decision making within the broad range of democratic alternatives. (Persily, 2017: 72)

There is clearly an absence of accountability in online platforms such as social media: while they facilitate direct communication between political actors and citizens, at the same time, traditional representative institutions and political parties are losing relevance and voters are becoming more fragmented, making it easier to manipulate the public opinion (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999: 248). The lack of transparency of social media platform owners regarding their data and governance model is part of the issue of accountability. Social networks may promote disinformation and “filter bubbles”, which are clearly not in the public interest: the commercial values that control the “platform mechanisms of selection” can negatively affect democratic processes (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 143-145). For instance, as the Internet allows targeting information according to the preferences of users, this situation creates a “communication bubble” in which citizens only receive messages which match their political and personal affinities (Persily, 2017: 72). Although democratic institutions may use social media in order to counteract misinformation, their communication effects are minimized by the characteristics of the platforms that enhance fragmentation.

However, the fragmentation of the public and the lack of accountability are not the only challenges for democratic deliberation online. Mazzoleni and Schulz propose the concept of “mediatized politics” to define situations in which political processes are becom-

ing more dependent on to their interactions with media (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999: 250). The 2016 US election represented a change in the way political communication was shaped online, and is a good example of mediatized politics. As traditional institutions, such as mainstream media and political parties, were losing legitimacy and no alternative institutions were filling the void, "an unmediated populist nationalism tailor-made for the Internet age" gained relevance and took their place (Persily, 2017: 64-66). Trump's campaign was successful not only because it filled the void left by traditional media, but also because the characteristics of social media made it possible for it to become viral. In Persily's words, "those who worry about the implications of the 2016 campaign are left to wonder whether it illustrates the vulnerabilities of democracy in the Internet age, especially when it comes to the integrity of the information voters will access as they choose between candidates" (Persily, 2017: 66-67).

One of the main worries of the 2016 US elections were fake news. Their relevance can be explained by the fact that some fake stories generated more engagement than articles published in mainstream news sites. Moreover, in some occasions, even official campaign channels would share fake stories on social media, especially Twitter (Persily, 2017: 68). Fake news not only are powerful because they can change the attitude of voters, but also because they promote demobilization and cynicism among citizens regarding political actors and institutions, creating "a blanket of fog that obscures the real news and information communicated by the campaigns" (Persily, 2017: 69). In brief, democratic deliberation on social media is negatively affected by different malpractices such as fake news, as a consequence of the lack of accountability, fragmentation of the public and mediatization of politics in the current platform ecosystem.

According to van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, "if societies want to create a platform structure that reflects and constructs a democratic order, they need to strive to implement public values and collective interests in the ecosystem's design". However, the current ecosystem does not reflect those values. The European focus on "social values and collective interests" often remains invisible in the online ecosystem, since it is dominated by US companies which merely seek economic profits and corporate interests (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 139). Governments should ideally assign different responsibilities to public, private and nonprofit platform operators and increase collaboration in order to promote "a platform society with checks and balances" that puts democratic values as a central aspect. In order to build a transparent and sustainable platform ecosystem, it is

important that all actors, including market, state and civil society, work together on its construction (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 161).

3. European institutions on social media

The use of social media for political communication and marketing purposes is a relatively new phenomenon; it was first introduced in the US during the 2008 presidential elections, after which it extended to Europe (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013: 12). The European Parliament (EP) was the first European institution to create social media accounts, during the election campaign in 2009. At the moment, there are more than 15 EU institutions with social media accounts in more than 10 different platforms and in different languages, as well as personal accounts for representatives of the EP, among other institutions. Hence, there has been a really rapid development of the use of social media in the European context (European Commission in Gaušis, 2017: 30-31). This development goes hand in hand with the noticeable increase of participation rates in social media during the last years, especially by young people. According to Eurostat, in 2017 half of the population between 16 and 29 years old in Europe used social media to interact with public authorities at least once (Eurostat, 2018). Therefore, social media platforms provide a valuable opportunity for institutions to engage with young citizens (Gaušis, 2017: 31).

To assess in which ways European institutions portray themselves on social media, it is important to take into consideration whether the institutions are trying to foster European citizenship, and in which ways they are working towards it. As stated by Richard Bellamy, citizenship can be identified by three elements: a sense of belonging to a community, citizen rights and political participation. While the “sense of belonging” is a rather subjective aspect, the rights of European citizens are indeed collected in EU treaties. The participation of citizens in the public sphere depends on the extent in which the other two components are present (Bellamy, 2008: 6).

It is clear the EU intends to transcend national citizenships within member states by fostering transnational interests and new forms of political participation on a European

level; however, these new proposals may come into conflict with the already established values of national citizenships, as in the case of the diverse national rights that have been legitimated democratically in the past (Bellamy, 2008: 9-10). In those cases, the attempts of the EU to unify diversified national legislations may be viewed as illegitimate by national citizens, especially if the processes are perceived as non-transparent and undemocratic (Bellamy, 2008: 29-30). According to Gaušis, citizens can only make use of their rights as Europeans if they are aware of how to use them; therefore, EU institutions have the moral obligation to inform citizens about "their rights, obligations and opportunities". In that sense, social media may be an effective channel to communicate European citizenship values, especially to young people, and appear more approachable and transparent (Gaušis, 2017: 29-30). As Karantzeni and Gouscos claim, "social networks could successfully bridge the gap between the citizens and the strict, hierarchical structure of the EU, consequently increasing its legitimacy through this kind of mediated proximity" (2013: 484).

The concept of European identity or citizenship was developed as part of the EU political agenda in the 1970s, to portray a sense of unity and common responsibility within the EU member states. Since the element that brings the members of the European Community together is not a "common cultural heritage", but the self-identification "with a common political structure, based on common institutions, rules and rights", the concept of European identity is based on civic rather than on cultural values. The EU has indeed created a "system of values" aimed at promoting the existence of a European citizenship, such as the common currency, the flag and the Chart of Fundamental Human Rights. However, the establishment of a European Public Sphere "through the promotion of a European identity" has failed to be successful due to the lack of legitimacy of the EU and the skepticism regarding citizen involvement in European political affairs. Moreover, Karantzeni and Gouscos highlight the role of mass media, which tends to present incomplete and fragmented information regarding the political activity in the EU, often appearing as secondary in comparison with national issues (Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013: 479-481).

This situation has lead European institutions to place a bigger emphasis on digital media in order to strengthen "citizen accessibility to European mechanisms and procedures" and to develop a European Public Sphere. Promoting eParticipation has become a central part of the current EU communication policy, in order to make institutions appear

more transparent and approachable to citizens. In Karantzeni and Gouscos's words, eParticipation can be defined as "information communication technologies (ICT) supported participation in processes involving citizens in government and governance". It is important to note that although the EU has placed great efforts into promoting eParticipation, this strategy has not managed to significantly improve digital participation of citizens at a European level. This could be explained due to the fact that it has been conceived as a "one-way communication process", not taking relevantly into account open interaction with citizens (Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013: 481-482).

Gaušis and Leston-Banderia both conducted analysis on the social media accounts of the European Parliament in 2013, focusing on Facebook and Twitter, with similar results. Both studies show that the institution was already quite active on social media at the time; nonetheless, the possibilities offered by these platforms were not fully exploited, as the type of communication that prevailed was mostly "top-down" and "one-to-many", similarly to the uses of traditional mass media communication channels, and the type of content published was mainly informative (Gaušis, 2017: 37; Leston-Bandeira, 2013: 9-10). Even though there was public engagement to some extent, which Leston-Bandeira explains as due to the lower levels of awareness and legitimacy of the EP in comparison with most national parliaments in their analysis, interactivity with citizens was not frequently present (Leston-Bandeira, 2013: 12-15). Likewise, Karantzeni and Gouscos observed that social media were used by EU institutions in a rather "formalistic approach" and limited to "a top-down information sharing process and focused on a continuous upload of latest news and official rhetoric", that could be understood by citizens as a way to advertise the institutions rather than providing citizens with a mechanism to become more active and involved in the processes of the EU (Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013: 491).

In 2013, the European Commission issued a report about the use of social media for organizations. When looking specifically at "online public services", the report points out that "although over the last decade, EU governments have invested heavily in ICT-enabled public services and despite the emergence of a multitude of social networking and social media services, the take-up has been relatively low and the anticipated transformation of the administration not as extensive as predicted" (European Commission, 2013: 9). The main challenge of social media for public organizations, according to the

report, is the clash of the hierarchical "organizational structures" with the social network structure (European Commission, 2013: 11).

For this research project, it may be useful to assess whether the current presence of EU institutions in social media is still mostly based on top-down communication processes, or if they have incorporated further citizen engagement. Although there is a lack of recent research on the social media presence of European institutions, a few articles give an idea of the current situation. Marino and Lo Presti's content analysis of the use of Twitter by European Commissioners shows that one-way communication strategies are still predominant in the platform (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018: 56). Krzyżanowski also analyses the communication strategy of the European Commission on Twitter, similarly concluding that the EU does not regard the potential of social media for connecting with citizens and only focuses on self-presentation (Krzyżanowski, 2018: 16).

Focusing on Instagram, although various European institutions and members of the EU have accounts on the platform, to my knowledge there is currently no existing research which examines the political uses of the social network from an EU perspective.

4. Methodology and data

4.1. Instagram as a political communication platform

In this thesis, images and videos published on the Instagram accounts of the European Parliament and the European Commission will be investigated using qualitative content analysis, in order to understand how these institutions present themselves and make use of the platform. The analysis focuses exclusively on Instagram because it is a popular visual-centered social media platform which allows analyzing the self-representation of political actors and, in this case, institutions, from a visual perspective. Existing literature about the role of visuality in political communication has tended to focus on how political actors have been framed by mass media. Nonetheless, visual content is also crucial for political communication in the context of social media, because it allows building one's image and having a strong impact on viewers (Filmanov, Russmann and

Svensson. 2016: 2). As Glantz claims, “the praise that Instagram has received as a political communication tool has tended to focus on how it provides politicians with a concise, direct method of sharing their message and enhancing their image, and how it helps citizens feel personally connected to government and its leaders” (Glantz, 2013: 695).

There are previous analyses of the self-representation of European political institutions on text-based social media, however those focus on Facebook and especially Twitter (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013; Gaušis, 2017; Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013; Leston-Bandeira, 2013; Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2018). On the other hand, the few analyses conducted on Instagram tend to focus on individual political actors or political institutions in national contexts (Filminov, Russmann and Svensson, 2016; Lanclette and Raynauld, 2017; Liebhart and Bernhardt, 2017; Eldin, 2016; Muñoz and Towner, 2017; Holiday, Lewis and LaBaugh, 2015).

4.1.1. Instagram: visuality and interaction

Instagram is a social media platform based on the publication of visual content (pictures and short videos) launched in 2010, and currently owned by Facebook. With more than one billion monthly active users and more than 500 million daily users, it is one of the most used social media platforms nowadays (Instagram Info Center, 2018). Instagram does not offer any official data about the demographic characteristics of users; nonetheless, the platform seems to be especially popular among young people. In the US context, the report *Teens, Social Media and Technology*, published by the Pew Research Center, claims that a 72% of teens use Instagram, making it the second most popular social media platform among that age group in the US (Anderson and Jiang, 2018: 2). In the age group between 18 and 24, the percentage of Instagram users is similar, with a 71% of active users. However, when looking at the average use of social media by adults in the US, Instagram still appears in third place, but only a 35% of adults claim to use it (Smith and Anderson, 2018: 2-4). Unfortunately, to my knowledge there is currently no available data about the demographic characteristics of Instagram users in Europe. However, the American context gives an idea of the popularity of the platform among young people.

The main purpose of Instagram is allowing users to edit and to share pictures and videos in their profiles, and to interact with the content of other users. The content published on the platform is visible to all users, unless the settings of the profile are changed to private. Users on Instagram are divided between followers and followed, meaning that the content published by followed accounts will appear on the follower's main page. Moreover, users can also browse through content that Instagram algorithm provides, and search for specific content according to an account name, hashtag or geolocation. There are two types of accounts on Instagram: personal accounts for individual users and business accounts for companies and organizations, which additionally offer statistical information about content views and followers. According to Instagram, in 2019 there are a total of 25 million business profiles on the platform (Instagram, 2019).

In 2016, Instagram launched one of its most popular features, named Stories. The feature was created to work similarly to the social media platform Snapchat, in which users can post visual content that becomes available for other users to view during a period of 24 hours. The content published on the Stories function disappears after 24 hours of its publication; however, users have the choice of featuring previous Stories in their profiles, which become visible indefinitely. In 2018, Instagram estimated that 400 million users were using the Stories function, which is twice the amount of active Snapchat users (Business Insider, 2018).

With the Stories feature, users can post images and short videos which are viewable in a slideshow format. Content published in Stories is visible for everyone unless the publisher's profile is private, and users can react to Stories by sending a private message, or by resharing them in their own profile if they are featured in the content. Moreover, the function offers multiple possibilities to edit the content before publishing it. For example, it is possible to add filers, text, emoticons and GIFS, tag other users, or include the current geolocation and time; among other elements. It is also possible to add interactive features such as polls, ratings and questions to a Story, which other users can answer to. The results of polls and ratings become visible to those who have responded to them; in the case of questions, the answers can be shared if the asking user decides to do so. Finally, the Stories feature also allows users to make live video retransmissions.

Besides the above mentioned interactive features in Stories (polls, questions, ratings and live retransmissions), Instagram offers other possibilities of interaction between users.

Users can react to regular posts by "liking" them or by writing comments on them, and they have the possibility to "like" and answer other people's comments as well. Private messages can be used to engage into direct conversation or to respond to Stories. Public content can be shared by other users in their own profiles; however, in the case of Stories, it is only possible to do so if the sharing user is tagged in the content. Finally, in both Stories and regular posts it is possible to add hashtags, links to external pages, current locations and to tag other users. Overall, the interactive possibilities of Instagram are similar to those on Twitter, but lower in comparison with other social media platforms such as Facebook. For example, Instagram does not allow creating "groups" or "events" that users can subscribe to, nor engaging into chat conversations with multiple users at the same time.

As it is the case with other major social media platforms, political actors and institutions make use of Instagram to spread their content and to communicate with citizens. Moreover, the platform itself is trying to promote political participation; for example, during the 2018 US midterm elections Instagram introduced two new features to encourage people to register and vote. On the one hand, the platform provided all the necessary information about how to register to vote using inserted advertisements[2]. On the other hand, Instagram launched an "I voted" sticker in order for users to share their voting experience in their Stories[3]. These two features are relevant because they are examples of how Instagram itself is trying to mobilize users into political participation. However, something to be noted about the political uses of Instagram is that, since users are more likely to see content only from accounts they agreed to follow or from similar accounts to the ones they interact with, the platform may be more useful in terms of connecting citizens with institutions and politicians who they already support, rather than changing their current political views (Glantz, 2013: 695). The following section will consist on an overview of the existing research about political communication on Instagram.

[2]Instagram (2018). *Helping Our Community Register to Vote*: https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/09/18/helping-our-community-register-to-vote/

[3]Instagram (2018). *Sharing Your Election Day Excitement on Instagram*: https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/11/01/sharing-your-election-day-excitement-on-instagram/

4.1.2. Political communication research on Instagram

Although nowadays Instagram is one of the most used social media platforms, and it has also been adopted by political institutions and actors to manage their image through the publication of visual content, it has remained comparatively unexplored in relation with other popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This might be explained due to the fact that Instagram does not facilitate the collection of data for research purposes, and additionally because the platform is relatively new in comparison with the other mentioned social networks. The number of existing research about political communication on Instagram is indeed rather limited. Still, in recent years more studies have emerged which analyze how politicians and institutions communicate on the platform. The research on the political uses of Instagram has especially focused on the self-presentation of individual actors in different national contexts.

In 2016, in one of the first research projects about political communication on Instagram, Filminov, Russmann and Svensson analyzed how Swedish political parties used the social media platform for campaign purposes during the 2014 elections in Sweden. They concluded that parties mainly used Instagram for broadcasting information rather than mobilizing citizens, and that personalization was strongly present in the content; for example, parties tended to use the image of top candidates in the pictures published on their Instagram profiles (Filminov, Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 8-9). In 2017, Lanclette and Raynauld explored the visual rhetoric of Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Instagram through the first year after he was elected (2017: 29). Similarly, Liebhart and Bernhardt analyzed the image management of Alexander Van der Bellen on the platform during the 2016 Presidential Election Campaign in Austria (2017: 12). In both cases, results point out that the Prime Ministers shaped their image by combining images in professional and personal contexts, and that they used Instagram mainly to broadcast, and in some occasions, mobilize their voters.

Other articles that have explored the uses of Instagram for political communication include Eldin's descriptive study analyzing the effects of Instagram during the election campaign of 2015 in Bahrain (Eldin, 2016); Muñoz and Towner's analysis on the candidates' Instagram profiles during the US Presidential Primary Elections campaign (Muñoz and Towner, 2017), and Holiday, Lewis and LaBaugh's study that explores

how the president of Syria Bashar al Assad presented himself differently to English and Arab audiences in his Instagram account (Holiday, Lewis and LaBaugh, 2015).

Although the mentioned research gives some insight on how Instagram is being used by politicians and, to some extent, political parties on a national level, there is no previous research focusing on how transnational political institutions present themselves on Instagram. Moreover, even though the Stories feature is widely used by political and institutional accounts, to my knowledge there are currently no existing studies which analyze the use of Stories in terms of political communication, and therefore it is a relevant aspect to take into consideration in this research project, due to the interactive possibilities it includes. In conclusion, the existing research on political communication in the context of Instagram is very limited, and further analyses are necessary in order to have a better understanding of the political uses of this social media platform. As visuality is a central aspect of Instagram, in the following section the relevance of visual content for political communication will be discussed.

4.2. Visual communication

Images are an effective tool when it comes to creating an impact on viewers and influencing their opinion, and therefore they are useful in the context of political communication, for example when trying to portray trust and legitimacy to citizens. In the past decades, visuality has become an essential part of marketing and political campaigning, and its relevance has increased even more in the online media landscape. The effect of images may also be enhanced when accompanied by text which provides additional information, as well as sound and speech in the case of videos (Filmanov et al. 2016: 3). However, even though visual content is increasingly relevant in online communication, it has remained comparatively less explored than textual elements (Highfield and Leaver, 2016: 4).

4.2.1. Political functions of visual content

According to Schill, visual content has ten functions in political communication. These include “serving as arguments, having an agenda setting function, dramatizing policy, aiding in emotional appeals, building the candidate’s image, creating identification, connecting to societal symbols, transporting the audience, and adding ambiguity”

(Schill, 2012: 122). The most relevant of those functions in the political context is the argumentative one, since images can be used to persuade viewers as they tap "into existing cultural and historical knowledge within the audience", usually accompanied by linguistic or textual arguments. For example, if a politician is portrayed with their family in an informal context, or with crowds of supporters behind them, these images are making an argument about his or her values and character, and viewers may draw certain conclusions from it (Schill, 2012: 122-124).

Another relevant function is the agenda-setting function. Visual content can be used by political actors to grab the attention of mass media, especially in the context of social networks. Since mass media and social media are both becoming increasingly visual-centered, politicians may post pictures and videos that have more chances to be covered by news sites. This purpose is also related to the dramatization function, which refers to the power of images to "add interest" to the values they portray, as well as to the emotional appeal of visual symbols and to the identification this emotional appeal can create on the viewers (Schill, 2012: 124-129).

Building a candidate's image is also an important function, since most citizens learn about politicians and the institutions they represent mainly through visual content. In Schill's words, "because visual symbols are critical in forming a politician's image, candidates and their advisors consider how to use those pictures to communicate a desired image" (Schill, 2012: 127-128). The rest of functions that Schill describes are the documentation function, according to which visual content may be utilized to prove certain claims; the use of societal symbols such as flags or historical locations to create a connection between political actors and the symbols; the figurative transportation of the audience "to a time in the past or an idyllic future" through the emotional appeal of images, and the function of adding ambiguity in controversial arguments, for instance when intending to attack someone but not wanting to do it verbally and explicitly (Schill, 2012: 129-132).

Similarly, Domke, Perlmutter and Spratt identify various functions of visual content. They propose that images have the abilities of being easily remembered, becoming icons of certain events or issues, retrieving happenings and having emotional impact, as well as political power in the sense that visual content can "create, alter, or reinforce elite or popular beliefs about causes and/or issues of the day and further affect govern-

ment policy" (Domke, Perlmutter and Spratt, 2002: 133-134). However, their findings suggest that images do not have power on their own, but rather relate to preexisting ideas, cognitions and feelings, and moreover often appear in conjunction with words (Domke et al. 2002: 147).

Finally, Geise and Baden use the term multimodality to refer to the "communicative interaction" between different modalities, such as sound, image and text, in a certain context. Different modalities create meaning as a whole by complementing each other, while each of them has their own potential and limitations. For example, text captions are often added in pictures to provide information that may not be deduced just by observing the image in itself (Geise and Baden, 2014: 4).

4.2.2. Visuality online

In the context of Web 2.0 and e-marketing, the need for visual content has increased. Marland proposes the term "image bytes" to define "the constant need for visual content and a market for free digital photos and video". Visual content has become a "direct marketing tool" for politicians and institutions, who can communicate directly to citizens using online communication channels such as social media platforms, becoming less dependent on journalists as intermediates to spread their messages to the audiences (Marland, 2012: 215-217).

Focusing on social media, visual images have increasingly gained relevance with the rise in popularity of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat. Simultaneously, already popular text-based platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have incorporated more visual content among their uses (Highfield and Leaver, 2016: 3). In Russmann's and Svensson's words, "the sharing of images is becoming an integral part of the social media experience today, and given that social media platforms are the prime locus for sociability—at least among young people in the West—this shift towards visuals arguably transforms how we relate to each other and the world around us" (Russmann and Svensson, 2017: 1).

The relevance of visual communication should be understood differently in the context of social media than in traditional media. Videos and images in social networks tend to be accompanied not only by written text, but also by links, hashtags and emoticons, among other elements. Most social media platforms also allow filtering, framing and

editing pictures before being published. Therefore, visual content does not merely provide additional information but also involves "highly strategic and reflexive communication", in the sense that the publishing individual or institution can specifically craft which impressions they want their content to have on viewers (Russmann and Svensson, 2017: 2).

4.3. Research design

First of all, the research questions of this thesis are the following:

1. *In which ways do European political institutions use Instagram to communicate with citizens and how do they portray themselves on the platform?*
2. *What are the differences, in terms of content, between the use of the Stories function and the regular posts?*
3. *How do the interactive features of Instagram affect the institutions' democratic deliberation with users?*

In order to examine the above presented research questions, multimedia content analysis will be implemented as a method to analyze content posted on Instagram by the official accounts of European institutions. Content analysis is understood in Krippendorff's terms, as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). In this case, images and videos are the main focus of analysis; however, since visual content published on social media tends to appear mixed with other types of content (e.g. text in pictures/videos, emoticons as visual elements in texts), visual content will be analyzed in relation with textual elements and also speech, in the case of videos. Content analysis has been selected because it is a flexible method that allows analyzing different types of data and can be applied to a variety of research purposes, and therefore it is easily exportable to the context of social media in this study (White and Marsh 2006: 23). Moreover, in reference to the third research question, the concept of democratic deliberation is understood widely as "any engagement in political debate" between institutions and citizens which is politically meaningful, since a wide interpretation of the concept allows taking into consideration as many relevant aspects as possible in the analysis (Storsul, 2014: 25).

The data will be examined using a qualitative approach. Qualitative content analysis can be defined as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1278). In the context of this study, this type of design may be more appropriate in order to provide a detailed insight of the content published by the European institutions on Instagram, due to the lack of existing research on the topic.

Additionally, thematic analysis will be also be used as a method. Thematic analysis is considered a subtype of qualitative content analysis, which allows "analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (Braun and Clarke, 2006; in Nowell et al. 2017: 2). Themes do not necessarily depend "on quantifiable measures", but rather on their relevance in relation with the research questions. There are two different ways to identify themes in the analysis: in inductive analysis the themes arise from the data itself, while in deductive analysis themes are defined according to previous theory and research (Nowell et al. 2017: 8). In this research project, the themes of the content have been defined inductively. On the other hand, deductive analysis has been used in the rest of the content analysis. Particularly, the main categories of analysis have been defined according to a prior research project of political communication on Instagram conducted by Russmann and Svensson (2016), in order to avoid too much personal subjectivity in the coding process of the data.

Something to be taken into consideration while using content analysis as a method in communication research is that "communications tend to reinforce the very institutional explanations and rules by which they are created and disseminated" (Krippendorff, 2004: 73). For example, traditional mass media tends to operate accordingly with the one-way theory of communication; therefore communication research is more likely to encourage the use of this theory instead of providing insights on other types of communication (Krippendorff, 2004: 73-74). While social media are more interactive by nature than traditional media, since they are based on many-to-many communication, this does not imply that the interactive possibilities are fully exploited by those who communicate through them.

4.4. Data collection

The units of sampling for this research project include the institutional accounts of the European Parliament (@europeanparliament) and the European Commission (@europeancommission) on Instagram. The sampling has been planned in a purposive way that allows identifying relevant and specific answers to the research questions (White and Marsh, 2006: 35). The first requisites were that the accounts should be official and represent the view of the central EU institutions. Therefore, other institutional accounts which only post content directed towards citizens of certain European states, as well as official accounts of members of the mentioned institutions, have not been considered for analysis. Moreover, the activity level of the institutions on Instagram has also been taken into consideration, meaning that inactive accounts have not been included in the analysis. The Council of the European Union (@eucouncil) was also part of the first sampling; however, after collecting the data, I decided not to include it in the sample due to the lack of content published during the analyzed period.

Data has been collected exclusively on Instagram and includes both pictures and videos, as well as their captions. There are two different types of data: regular posts, which are available indefinitely in the user's profile, and Stories, which is content available only during 24 hours. For the present study, other types of content available on the Instagram profiles of the institutions, such as live video transmissions through IGTV and previous Stories featured in their profiles, as well as user comments, have not been considered for analysis. Images were saved using regular screenshots, while videos were recorded and stored using a screen recording application (DU Recorder).

The analyzed content was collected during a period of 30 days, between January 16th and February 15th 2019. A total of 372 units were collected, from which 111 are regular posts and 261 are Stories. Specifically focusing on the content of each institution, the European Parliament posted 47 posts and 192 Stories during the analyzed period, while the European Commission published 64 posts and 69 Stories. Data collection units are formed by individual posts and individual Stories respectively. However, due to the characteristics of Instagram, an individual post may include more than a single image or video; nonetheless in the case of Stories it is only possible to have one image or video per unit. In order to facilitate the analysis process, each unit has been given an individu-

al number and a different letter to identify whether it is a regular post or a Story. Posts are identified with a "P" (P1, P2…), while Stories are identified with an "S" (S1, S2…).

After the collection process, the data was transferred from a smartphone to a computer for further analysis. The content was categorized using the program Microsoft Office Excel. The units of analysis are the same than the units of data collection in the case of regular posts (1 unit = 1 post), but in the case of Stories individual units have also been gathered together thematically to analyze certain aspects. This is due to the fact that, in many occasions, individual Stories do not have full meaning on their own, but are part of a bigger unit of content instead. For example, a video of a speech by a politician may be split in two or three different Stories, due to the existing limitation of time for videos on Instagram; however, in this case, the speech only makes sense when taking into account all the videos as a whole. In total, 67 thematic units of analysis were identified in Stories.

4.5. Data analysis

In order to analyze the visual content published on Instagram by the European Parliament and the European Commission, the four clusters presented by Uta Russmann and Jakob Svensson in their article S*tudying Organizations on Instagram* will be used (2016: 4). The clusters are the following:

- Perception: what is the purpose of the content? Is it used for mobilizing the viewers or broadcasting information? Does it portray a certain image of the institution? (1st research question)
- Image management: what kind of message is the content trying to portray? Is there personalization, privatization or celebratization? (1st research question)
- Integration: does the content include links to other platforms? Does it make reference to other media? Are other users tagged? (1st and 2nd research questions)
- Interactivity: does the content provide opportunities of engagement with users? (3rd research question)

The categories introduced above represent an adequate frame for coding the data in the context of this study because they have been specifically created for analyzing content on Instagram. Moreover, they can be used in accordance with the research questions of

this research project. Although Russmann and Svensson originally applied the categories exclusively to regular posts and pictures, they are easily applicable to Stories and videos as well. The authors themselves state in their article that "our hope is that the readers of this Special Issue will use as well as adapt our methodological framework to advance research on Instagram or other image-based social media platforms" (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 2). Consequently, using those clusters of analysis does not represent a problem of interests.

Although the main categories of analysis are extracted from the article of Russmann and Svensson, certain variables have been modified and new ones have been added according to the research questions and the type of data of this study. For example, as the analysis focuses exclusively on the content published by European institutions on Instagram, some aspects of integration (such as the sharing of the same content in other online media sites) and interactivity (such as user comments and likes) have not been taken into consideration. Furthermore, other variables which are necessary to answer the research questions have been added. In order to facilitate the analysis process and make it as impartial as possible, variables only include mutually exclusive categories, except in the case of topic and hashtags, in which the categories will be defined inductively from the content itself.

In the table below, the four clusters defined by Russmann and Svensson will be presented along with the coding variables included in each of them:

Perception	**Image management**	**Integration**	**Interactivity**
Main purpose of content • Broadcasting/ informing • Mobilizing • Ambivalent	Type of content • Picture • Illustration • Video • Animation	Available links • Instagram (own account) • Instagram (different account) • Other social media (own account) • Other social media (different account) • EU institutional webpage • Others	Interactive elements (only in Stories) • Questions • Polls • Ratings

Explicit reference to users • Users are referred to explicitly • Users are not referred to explicitly	Topic of the content	Content similarity between Stories and posts • Same content • Same topic but different content • Different content and topic	Citizen engagement in democratic deliberation • Explicitly fosters deliberation • Does not foster deliberation
Context • Official • Extra-official/informal • Not applicable	Hashtags		
Perception • Snapshot • Staged • Not applicable	Personalization • Personalized • Not personalized		
The building of the European identity • Elements of European identity are visible/ mentioned • No visible elements of European identity	Celebratization • Celebrity visible • Celebrity not visible		
	Privatization • Private context • Public context		

In the following pages, the aspects that define the four clusters of analysis will be explained in more detail.

4.5.1. Perception

Perception, in the context of social media research, refers to the way people view, for example, a certain political institution through the visual content they post. Pictures and videos may have different purposes, such as spreading content (broadcasting), increasing viewer participation (mobilization) and portraying a certain image of oneself (perspective) (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 4). Social networks serve as platforms for political institutions to portray themselves closer to regular citizens, by discussing aspects that directly affect them instead of presenting issues “on the abstract political level” (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013: 27).

The network logic offers a viable framework to understand how political communication unwinds on social media. As there is no such thing as mass communication in net-

work media logics, it is not enough for politicians and institutions to be present on social media, but furthermore they must create a network of as many linkages as possible in order for their messages to reach as many users as possible. Moreover, the "virality" or popularity of the content is also a crucial aspect to expand the scope of audience in social media. For that reason, political actors may tend to publish content that is more likely to become viral, such as personalized and emotional messages (Klinger and Svensson, 2014: 1252-1253).

In order to achieve a better understanding about how the European Parliament and the European Commission intend to be perceived by users on Instagram, the criteria of analysis will consist of the main purpose of the content, whether there is explicit reference to users, the context and perception of the image and, finally, if there is a clear intention to build a European identity.

4.5.2. Image management

Image management refers to the ways in which institutions portray themselves to create certain impressions on viewers. In many cases, social media is used to conceive a more trustful image about the organization; this can be achieved, for example, by focusing on certain individuals in the content (personalization), blurring between private and public spheres (privatization), and using celebrities to spread a certain message (celebritization) (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 4-5). The concept of "institutional personalization", for instance, refers to a situation in which certain individuals of an institution are enhanced due to their position as "leaders" (Balmas and Sheafer, 2013: 457). Although these trends are not new in political communication, there has certainly been an increase of their use during the last years (Balmas and Sheafer, 2013: 456).

Personalization and celebritization in politics already existed before the Internet; for example, populist leaders have been using personalization techniques for a long time. However, these trends have been strengthened in the context of social media. Social fragmentation, accentuated by the social network potential of new technologies, has promoted the further individualization of citizens, by placing individuals at the center of their own networks. In that context, political institutions find that "personalized appeals" help them engage better with "growing ranks of independent voters" (Bennett, 2012: 22; Eckman and Widholm, 2014: 518). It is not enough for political actors to be

present in social media, but they should also achieve visibility by becoming active and targeting distinct audiences with different content (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013: 19).

In order to understand how European institutions are managing their social media image on Instagram, therefore, it will be relevant to identify whether their content tends to be personalized, and if trends of privatization and celebritization are also present. Moreover, other aspects of image management that will be analyzed include the topic of the content, the type of content and the use of hashtags.

4.5.3. Integration

The concept of integration or hybridity refers to the possibilities that social networks provide to integrate content on various platforms (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 7). According to Klinger and Svensson, media hybridity can be defined as the overlapping between mass media and network media logics. For instance, political actors on Facebook tend to share journalistic content about them posted on traditional media. At the same time, content published by certain actors on social media platforms, especially Twitter, may be shared in traditional media as well (Klinger and Svensson, 2014: 1251).

Trump's campaign in the 2016 US Presidential Elections represents a good example of media hybridity. According to Persily, Trump used Twitter to increase news coverage, in a similar way to issuing press releases. Twitter was not only a platform to communicate with voters, but also a tool to provide content that would be shared on mass media sites, with the finality of increasing the impact of Trump's messages (Persily, 2017: 67). The integration of content in the form of "media connectivity", allows the image that politicians and institution are portraying of themselves to transcend the boundaries of social networks and online media, "creating a potentially infinite helix of self-mediation and news media attention" (Ekman and Widholm, 2014: 519).

In this particular analysis, integration will be examined through the available links in the content posted by the European institutions. Moreover, the integration between Stories and regular posts will also be considered, by analyzing their similarities and differences. Instagram content shared on other platforms has not been taken into consideration, as the analysis focuses exclusively on the content published by the European Parliament and the European Commission on their Instagram profiles.

4.5.4. Interactivity

If institutions were to take full advantage of the opportunities that social media offers for democratic engagement, participation through online tools should go both ways. In other words, interaction between institutions and civil society is necessary in order to create a meaningful discussion and to communicate successfully through online platforms (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013: 13). According to Castells (2008) and Leston-Bandeira (2013), "multimodal" social networks are the most effective way for institutions to consolidate a communication channel that allows them to engage with the social demands of citizens.

Interactivity is indeed a key feature of the democratic potential of social media, since it allows politicians and institutions to communicate directly with users, without the need of intermediaries. Furthermore, interactivity fosters the participation of civil society in public debates and in "decision-making processes", allowing institutions to have a better understanding of citizens' demands (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 8). On Instagram, for instance, certain features are aimed at achieving further user participation through interactivity, such as the possibility to add questions, ratings and polls to a Story.

In this research project, therefore, interactive elements in Stories as well as their purpose will be analyzed. Moreover, another aspect to consider while assessing the level of interaction between European institutions and civil society will be whether the content promotes the engagement of citizens in democratic deliberation with the institutions. Likes and comments will not be part of the analysis.

4.6. Reliability and validity of the research

Qualitative content analysis, the method that will be used to analyze the data in this research project, is often portrayed as rather subjective (White and Marsh, 2006: 35). This is due to the fact that this method focuses on defining phenomena through a certain perspective and within a particular framework, instead of aiming to describe reality in an objective way (White and Marsh, 2006: 38). Subjectivity is moreover intensified in political communication research, since political communication tends to be "highly nuanced and are driven by marketing a specific crafted message" (Pal and Gonawela, 2017: 99). In this context, defining the coding categories in advance does not guarantee

a straightforward classification of the content; content analysis always requires an "iterative reading of the text" (White and Marsh, 2006: 33).

Although subjectivity is inevitable, especially in qualitative research, in order to improve the reliability and validity of this thesis I have exhaustively described the criteria and processes of data collection and analysis in the previous sections. Moreover, in this part I will express my own position regarding political communication in social media, with the intention to provide a relevant framework of the context in which this research project is set.

My position is similar to the view of Persily (2017) and Tucker et al. (2017), according to which social media are neither democratic nor undemocratic by nature. These platforms are indeed owned by profit-driven corporations; therefore I understand that their main purpose is not to promote democracy or democratic values, but rather to make economic profits. However, I also consider that the social network structure allows for more horizontal and direct ways of communication which, along with the popularity of these platforms, may be used for political institutions to encourage democratic deliberation with citizens. In that sense, social media have the potential to become a public sphere and, therefore, one of the purposes of this thesis is to assess whether institutions are making use of that possibility.

4.7. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations for the present research project have been taken into consideration according to the Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). However, no major issues have aroused: the data collected and analyzed can be used for research purposes because it is published by public institutions in an open social media platform. The topic of the research does not involve ethical problems either: as the purpose is merely to describe how European institutions make use of a certain social media platform, in this case there is no possible harm for the institutions and the people involved.

The Data Policy of Instagram clearly states that public information includes content published and shared in a public Instagram profile, and that this type of content is accessible to anyone and can be "seen, accessed, reshared or downloaded" freely. Moreo-

ver, the Data Policy explicitly expresses the possibility of the content being downloaded, screenshoted and reshared outside the platform with the following sentence: “people who can see your activity on our Products can choose to share it with others on and off our Products, including people and businesses outside the audience you shared with” (Instagram, 2018). Therefore, consent for data collection is not necessary, because the information is published publicly and it is presupposed that the analyzed institutions are aware of the Data Policy of Instagram. Furthermore, it is also understood that individuals who are featured in the analyzed content are aware of their appearance and have previously given their consent to it.

5. Analysis

In this section, the focus will shift to the results of the analysis of the content published by the European Parliament and the European Commission accounts on Instagram. The analysis is structured according to the clusters of analysis of Russmann and Svensson, presented in the methodology section. The results for each variable will be discussed in detail under the headings of each of the four clusters.

5.1. Perception

5.1.1. Main purpose

The analysis of the data suggests that the majority of the content has a broadcasting purpose. Out of 376 collected units, 246 (66%) have a clear broadcasting function, while 80 (22%) have a mobilization purpose and 46 (12%) have an ambivalent purpose, in which both functions are equally present. Therefore, according to the results, Instagram is mostly used by European institutions as a platform to inform users, rather than to mobilize citizens. Even though broadcasting is clearly predominant in both regular posts and Stories, the amount of informative content is higher in regular posts, while Stories tend to include slightly more mobilization. Specifically, 79 posts (71%) have a broadcasting purpose, while 18 (16%) have a mobilization purpose and 14 (13%) have an ambivalent purpose. On the other hand, 167 (64%) Stories have a broadcasting func-

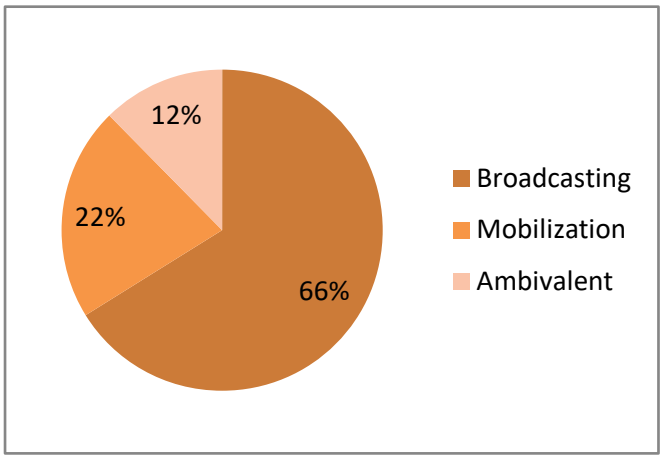

Figure 1. **Main purpose (total)**

tion, while 62 (24%) have a mobilization function and 32 (12%) have an ambivalent function.

The European Parliament elections that will take place in May 2019 are a recurrent theme in the mobilizing content, most likely in order to increase the participation rates. For example, through the analyzed period, both the EC and the EP have been sharing content about their campaign *This Time I'm Voting*[4], which intends not only to directly persuade citizens to vote in the EU elections, but also for people to encourage other citizens to vote through means of interpersonal communication. However, it should be noted that the category of mobilization does not exclusively include content which promotes political mobilization (e.g. persuading citizens to vote in the EU elections), but also other types of mobilization which may not be so relevant politically speaking (e.g. participating in photography contest organized by the European Parliament).

Overall, the results of the analysis confirm that the European Parliament and the European Commission use Instagram mainly to broadcast information, and although mobilization is also present to some extent, it does not always promote political participation. Previous studies about the social media presence of European institutions have also reached similar conclusions. Gaušis, Leston-Banderia and Karantzeni and Gouscos have all described the communication strategy of the European institutions as mostly based on one-directional types of communication with the purpose of informing citizens, rather than mobilizing them (Gaušis, 2017: 37; Leston-Bandeira, 2013: 9-10; Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013: 491). Moreover, the results are also similar to the findings of Filminov, Russmann and Svensson in their analysis of Instagram use by political parties during the 2014 Swedish elections, according to which broadcasting was the predominant function (2016: 8).

[4] European Union (2018). *This time I'm voting* online campaign: https://www.thistimeimvoting.eu/

5.1.2. Explicit reference to users

Referring explicitly to users may serve as a way to promote citizen identification and engagement with social media content, especially if the content includes mobilization as one of its purposes. As Bellamy claims, the "sense of belonging to a community" is a key element of citizenship; however, it is a rather subjective aspect (2008: 6), and in the case of the EU there is the additional challenge of being an institution that represents very diverse national identities. Direct reference to users on Instagram can have many specific purposes, though in the context of EU institutions, referring explicitly to users in many occasions may also be considered as a way to make citizens feel more included in the European community.

The results of this analysis indicate that explicit reference to users is fairly common in the communication strategies of both the EP and the EC. Specifically, 164 (44%) of the analyzed units include explicit reference to users, while 208 (56%) units do not refer explicitly to users. When focusing on regular posts, the percentages are more equally distributed: 58 (52%) of units include explicit reference to users, while 53 (48%) do not. On the contrary, in the case of Stories there is less explicit reference to users: 106 (41%) of the analyzed Stories refer directly to users, while 155 (59%) do not.

Figure 2. **Example of explicit reference to users (unit S34 – European Parliament)**

The fact that, on average, less than half of the analyzed units include direct reference to users is again a proof that much of the content published by European institutions limits itself to present information to citizens, rather than encouraging mobilization. Although explicit reference to users is more common in mobilizing content, this feature is also identifiable in some informative content. For example, in a Story posted by the EP on the 1st of February 2019 (S34), the institution refers directly to users by

asking them a question, even though the purpose of doing so is merely to provide citizens with information about the extent of use of the .eu domain online.

In the analyzed content, reference to users most often appears as a textual element that accompanies the visual material, either in the caption or within the image. In some occasions, it is also present in audiovisual content in the form of speech. According to Domke, Perlmutter and Spratt, words that accompany images, as well as preexisting values that the observer holds, are the elements that actually give "power" to images, since images do not have influence on their own (2002: 147). In that sense, referring directly to users may help accomplish purposes such as creating identification, transporting the audience or achieving emotional reactions of users (Schill, 2012: 122).

5.1.3. Context

Mobile devices simplify the process of sharing content on social media, since they allow taking snapshots and uploading them online at any moment and in any location. Political organizations can take advantage of this possibility to share content in informal contexts which is not part of the official institutional agenda, since the costs of doing so are minimal (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 4). Moreover, providing extra-official content may help institutions appear more transparent, approachable and honest to citizens who engage with them on social media.

Overall, in the analyzed data images and videos set in an informal or extra-official context are more common than content set in an official context. In particular, in 133 (36%) units an informal context is identifiable, while 83 units (22%) unfold in an official context. However, in most of the content, 156 units (42%), there is no visible context, mainly due to the fact that they are illustrations and animations. The percentages are also similar when focusing specifically on regular posts and Stories. In regular posts there are 43 units (39%) set in an informal context, 26 (23%) in an official context and 42 (38%) in which the context is not identifiable. In Stories, 90 (34%) units are set in an informal context, 57 (22%) in an official context and in 114 (44%) the context is not identifiable.

In general, therefore, informal contextualization is predominant in the images and videos published by the EP and the EC on Instagram, confirming that European institutions use the social media platform to introduce content aside from the official agenda of the

EU. For instance, in a set of videos published by the EP on the 17th of January 2019 in the Stories feature (S3), various presenters display the Parliament in a rather informal manner. Although the events in the content take place within the institution itself, the content is not part of any official event; moreover, the presenters speak in a rather informal manner and occasionally use humor to communicate with users. Therefore, in this case, the context is considered to be extra-official.

5.1.4. Perception

Images uploaded on Instagram are usually snapshots recorded with smartphones which, as stated previously, facilitate the process of sharing visual content online. For that reason, Russmann and Svensson wonder whether political organizations make use of the snapshot possibilities to appear more casual and "blend in" on Instagram, or whether contrarily they tend to present themselves in a more professional and staged manner (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 4).

The results regarding the perception of the content indicate that snapshots are slightly more predominant than staged content. In total, 111 units (30%) are snapshots, while 106 (28%) are staged. In the rest of the 155 units (42%) perception cannot be analyzed, basically because the content consists of illustrations and animations. The amount of snapshots in regular posts is slightly higher than the average: 39 units (35%) are snapshots, while 25 (23%) are staged and 47 (42%) do not include any perception. In the case of Stories, 72 of the units (28%) consist of snapshots, while 81 (31%) are staged and in 108 units (41%) perception cannot be assessed.

These results seem to be in accordance with the findings regarding the context of the images: although the differences are not as noticeable, snapshot images, which are usually taken in informal contexts, are slightly more predominant than staged images, which tend to be portrayed in official contexts. The analyzed institutions may use Instagram in similar ways than regular citizens, for example by adding filers, hashtags and other features before publishing videos and images, as a way to enhance the identification of citizens (Filminov, Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 7). Publishing more snapshots, therefore, may also be understood as a way to appear closer to citizens.

5.1.5. The building of the European identity

According to Karantzeni and Gouscos, the concept of European identity, which was developed to portray a sense of unity and common responsibility within EU citizens, is based on civic values such as "common institutions, rules and rights", rather than on cultural values (Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013: 479). This is clear when looking at the analyzed content: most of the content is written in English rather than in national languages, it often addresses to European citizens as a whole, and portrays European values such as laws, trade agreements, cooperation between countries, the flag and the Euro, among others, in a positive manner.

Indeed, elements that shape the European identity are strongly present in the content posted on Instagram by the EP and the EC. European values are present in 271 of the analyzed units (73%), while 101 (27%) do not clearly portray any values of European identity. European identity is more common in regular posts than in Stories. In 86 of the posts (77%) European values are promoted, while in 25 units (23%) they are not promoted. In the case of Stories, 185 units (71%) promote European values and 76 (29%) do not.

These percentages demonstrated that the promotion of European values is a central aspect in the content published by the analyzed institutions. The building of a European identity can be understood as a strategy to gain more legitimacy or, in Karantzeni's and Gouscos words, as "a way to advertise the institutions" (Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013: 491). This social media strategy should be framed within the current context of lack of legitimacy of EU institutions, intensified by a widespread skepticism about citizen involvement in European political affairs, as well as by a lack of information about European issues is mainstream media (Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013: 480-481). Creating a sense

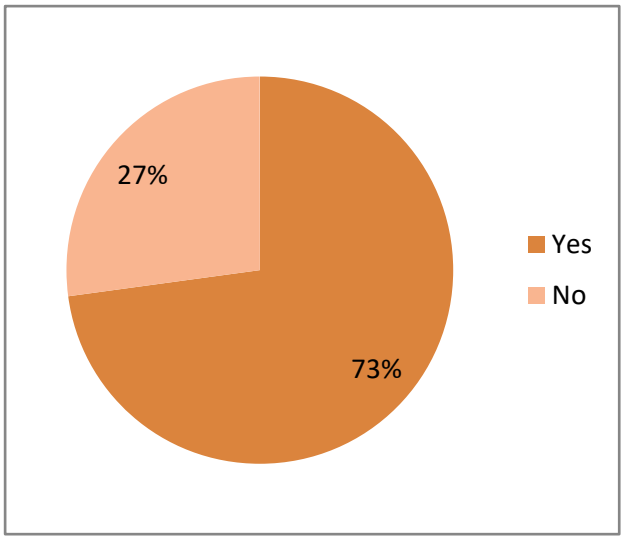

Figure 3. **The building of the European identity (total)**

of unity based on the values of European identity may persuade citizens to become more involved and interested in European affairs and, at the same time, help institutions gain more legitimacy and appear more transparent.

The celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Euro is a clear example of how the analyzed institutions use an element representative of the EU to reinforce European identity. On the 21th of January 2019, the European Commission shared a video on their profile for the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Euro titled "The Euro makes it easier" (P20), pointing out how the currency has facilitated the processes of travelling, working and transferring money within the EU. The video clearly intends to portray the Euro in a positive manner, as an element that has helped bringing European citizens together.

5.2. Image management

5.2.1. Type of content

Visuality is a central characteristic of Instagram, since the main purpose of the social media platform is editing and publishing pictures and videos, as well as interacting with other users' published content. Images, followed by videos, are unsurprisingly the most predominant type of content in the Instagram profiles of the analyzed European institutions, although they almost always appear accompanied by text (and sound in the case of audiovisual content). Taking into account the results concerning the purposes of the content, presented in the previous section, it is clear that the EP and the EC use visual content on Instagram mostly as an advertising tool that allows them to communicate directly with citizens, therefore being less dependent on intermediates such as mass media (Marland, 2012: 215, 217).

Focusing on the type of content, pictures and images are slightly more predominant than videos. Approximately half of the content, 172 units (46%), are pictures. The second biggest category is videos, with 126 units (34%). The rest of categories include illustrations, with 61 units (17%), and animations, with 12 units (3%). There are, however, some noticeable differences in the type of content between Stories and regular posts. Still pictures are overall more predominant in regular posts, while videos are more common in Stories. Specifically, in regular posts there are 63 pictures (57%), 18 illustrations (16%), 22 videos (20%), 7 video animations (6%) and one unit with both pic-

tures and videos. On the other hand, in Stories there are 109 pictures (42%), 43 illustrations (16%), 104 videos (40%) and 5 video animations (2%).

5.2.2. Topic of the content

The themes presented by the European institutions in their Instagram accounts are highly diverse. Seven main topics have been identified in the content: elections, European values, information about EU and institutions, institutional events, legislation and citizen rights, member states, and promotion of services and programs. Moreover, the category "others" has been created to include content which does not fit in any of those topics. Something to take into consideration is that although categories are exclusive in order to facilitate the analysis, most of the content includes aspects from more than one topic; only the most predominant topic is reflected. For example, European values are present in much of the content; however, they do not usually appear as the main topic of the content.

Focusing on regular posts, legislation and citizen rights is the topic which appears the most in the content, specifically in 41 units (37%). This category is fairly wide and includes a great variety of subtopics; among the most prominent ones are biodiversity and environment (8 units), health (6 units), agriculture and animal welfare (6 units), as well as Internet use and data protection (6 units). The rest of the topics in regular posts are present to a rather equal extent. In particular, issues about member states are present in 18 posts (16%), from which Brexit and visits of Heads of State in the EP are the most predominant subtopics. The category of European values includes 14 posts (13%), and the most recurring subtopic is the EP photography contest *I am Europe*, which intends to show the diversity of European citizens. Regarding the rest of topics, 11 units (10%) include information about the EU and about the institutions, 10 units (9%) are promoting EU services or programs, such as the Erasmus+ program; 7 (6%) are about the EU elections, 7 about institutional events and 3 (3%) do not fit in any of the established categories.

Focusing on Stories, topics are more evenly distributed among the 64 thematic units than in the case of regular posts, although some recurrent themes are also identifiable. Legislation and citizen rights appear in 15 units (23%), from which agriculture and animal welfare (3 units), Internet use and data protection (3 units) and self-driving cars (3 units) are the most predominant subtopics. European values are present in 12 units

(19%), again consisting mostly on the photography contest organized by the EP (9 units). 11 units (17%) present information about the EU and the institutions; the most prominent subcategory is the EU Alphabet section created by the EP, in which concepts related with the EU are explained. Issues about member states appear in 10 units (16%), again mostly about Heads of State visits to the EP (4 units) and Brexit (3 units). Finally, the topic of institutional events includes 7 units (11%), EU elections 5 units (8%) and promotion of EU services and programs 4 units (6%).

5.2.3. Hashtags

Hashtags are widely used by European institutions in their Instagram communication strategy to accompany visual content, being much more predominant in regular posts than in Stories. Approximately half of the units (187) include hashtags, while 185 (50%) do not. When looking specifically at regular posts, 85 units (77%) include hashtags, while 26 (23%) do not. On the other hand, hashtags are much less used in Stories: 102 units (39%) include hashtags, while 159 (61%) do not.

Hashtags have been taken into account as an aspect of analysis because they offer an idea of which themes are relevant to the institutions. In many occasions, hashtags make reference to key concepts in relation with the main topic of the visual content. For example, hashtags such as #Brexit, #EUFilmContest, #PlasticsStrategy and #WomeninScience clearly present specific topics of the content. However, in other cases, hashtags are also inserted to enhance user identification with the institutions. Some of the most used hashtags by the EP and the EC on Instagram include #IamEurope, #EUandME and #FutureOfEurope. These hashtags do not directly refer to the topic of the content they accompany, but rather reinforce the existence of a European identity and position the content within it. By introducing these hashtags in different pictures and videos institutions promote their use, as users that identify with European values may also embed them in their own content.

5.2.4. Personalization

Personalization, together with other trends such as celebratization and privatization, is part of the process of individualization of political communication on social media (Loader, Vromen and Xenos, 2016: 405). Depending on the perspective, personalization can be viewed either as beneficial or detrimental for democratic engagement with ci-

***Figure 4*. Example of personalization (unit P26 – European Parliament).**

tizens. On the positive side, new trends of political communication such as zation may be considered as useful tools for engaging young people in politics and democratic participation. In Loader, Vromen and Xenos' words, these alternative perspectives "allow us to consider that the culture of democratic politics may be changing without denying the possibility of its existence" (Loader et al., 2016: 404). On the negative side, institutions which use those trends mainly focus on branding their image, holding a neoliberal point of view that dominates the use of social media platforms for political purposes, and undermining the "political education of young people" (Eckman and Widholm, 2014: 518-519; Loader et al., 2016: 403).

The analyzed content posted by European institutions on Instagram tends to be rather personalized, meaning that individual people are often portrayed in it. For example, in the unit P26, the EP presents the European Youth Event though portraying one of the participants. In particular, 218 units (59%) include personalization to some degree, while 154 units (41%) do not appear to be personalized. Personalization is more common in Stories than in regular posts, since Stories also tend to focus on less abstract issues. Particularly, in regular posts 57 units (51%) include personalization and 45 (49%) do not. When looking at Stories, 161 units (62%) are personalized, while 100 (38%) are not.

These results are also similar to findings of previous research about political communication on Instagram. In their analysis about Instagram communication of Swedish political parties during the 2014 elections, Filminov, Russmann and Svensson found out that personalization was strongly present in the content (2016: 8-9). The predominance of

personalization in the analyzed content posted by the EC and the EP may be related with the function of enhancing citizen identification with the institutions. Due to the visual characteristics of social networks, and especially Instagram, users tend to engage more with content that portrays people rather than present institutions in an abstract manner. However, personalization should not be understood as a trend unique to social media, but rather as a characteristic of political communication which is present in visual media (e.g. television), due to the fact that people are more easily remembered and accessible to citizens than "abstract arguments about policies" (Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 166-167).

5.2.5. Celebritization

Celebritization is a trend related with the personalization of political communication, which consists of featuring celebrities in the content in order to achieve more influence and engagement with users. The term "celebrity connectivity", presented by Mattias Ekman and Andreas Widholm, characterizes the celebritization of politics in social media. In particular, celebrity connectivity defines how political actors interact with other prominent figures, both in real life and online, in order to gain more attention from the public and from mainstream media (Eckman and Widholm, 2014: 518-519; Loader et al., 2016: 404). Although celebritization already existed before the Internet the online space, and especially social media, has helped expand aspects of popular culture in political communication, such as celebrity behavior or reality TV conflicts, while simultaneously departing from formal politics and professionalized political communication (Gurevitch et al. 2009: 171-172). For the current analysis, only if cele-

Figure 5. **Example of celebritization (unit P4 – European Commission)**

brities who are not currently part of the institutions appear in the images it has been considered that there is celebritization.

In accordance with the analyzed content, celebritization does not seem to have an important role in the communication strategy of European institutions, in contrast with personalization. More specifically, the analysis shows that 278 (85%) of the units do not feature celebrities, and only 48 (15%) do include celebritization. The same percentages apply when looking at regular posts: 94 posts (85%) involve celebritization, while 17 (15%) do not. Regarding Stories, there is even less celebritization: only 31 units (12%) include celebrities, while 230 (88%) do not. Furthermore, most celebrities who appear in the content are Heads of Member States due to their visits in the European Parliament, such as in the above presented picture (P4) shared by the EC the 16th of January, rather than public figures featured solely with the purpose of promoting the institutions.

The use of celebrities in social media content may be more related with individual politicians and political parties than with public political institutions, due to the fact that those political actors need to be in a constant campaign mode (Gurevitch et al. 2009: 173-174). While public institutions also need to uphold their legitimacy, they may do so by using different techniques which are not so marketing-driven. For example, the analyzed European institutions on Instagram seem to portray closeness with citizens and encourage users to interact with them with the intention of appearing reliable and transparent.

5.2.6. Privatization

Social media have blurred the boundaries between public and private spheres in many different levels, becoming part of the process of liquefaction of society; for instance, different social roles are usually integrated in a single platform (Fuchs, 2014: 77). The concept of “public connectivity” refers to the fact that that content publish by political actors on social media tends to erase existing boundaries between their public and private life, as well as between politicians and their audience (Eckman and Widholm, 2014: 518-519). In that context, privatization can be understood as the trend according to which aspects of the private life of public figures are shown on social media.

Privatization is practically inexistent in the Instagram content of the analyzed political institutions. Although in many occasions, content is set in an informal context and per-

sonalization is quite present, the focus is not on people's private life, but rather on their relation with the institutions. In total, only three of the analyzed units include privatization to some extent. One of them is a Story and two are regular posts. All three of these units consist of short videos: two of the units, posted by the EP, portray the personal relationship between two European citizens on the occasion of Valentine's Day, making emphasis on the simplification that the EU has provided to travel within its boundaries. The third unit, published by the EC, consists of a trailer for a short film about a young man who turned dancing into his profession; in that case, the emphasis is on the production of European audiovisual content. As in the case of celebritization, privatization may be more useful for individual political actors than for institutions.

5.3. Integration

5.3.1. Available links

Links seem to be a relatively important element in the communication strategy of the EP and the EC on Instagram: although less than half of the analyzed units include linked pages, the amount is still quite significant. In total, 142 units (38%) include links to other sites, while 230 (62%) do not. The percentages of links are exactly the same when focusing on regular posts and Stories. 42 of the posts include linked pages and 69 do not, while 100 Stories include links and 161 do not (38% and 62% respectively).

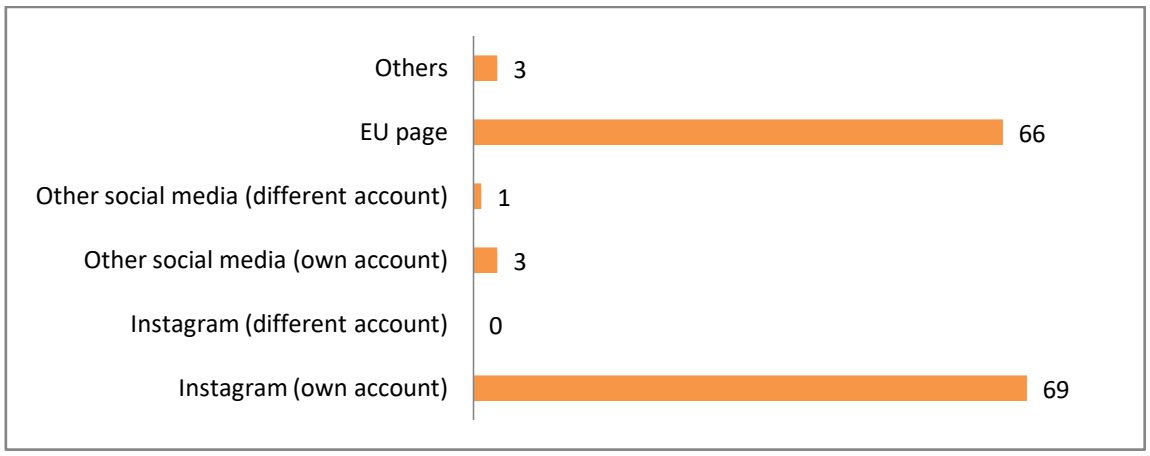

Figure 6. **Available links (total)**

In order to have a better understating of the purposes of links, the types of sites linked have also been analyzed. In general, EU institutional pages and the institutions' own Instagram accounts are the most linked sites. Links to EU pages appear in 66 units,

while links to their own Instagram accounts appear in 69 units. However, those links are unevenly distributed between regular posts and Stories: all links to Instagram and 26 of the links to EU institutional pages appear in Stories, while in regular posts links to EU sites are predominant, with 40 units. Other types of links do not seem to have such an important role in the analyzed units. Content published on other social media platforms, namely Facebook, has been linked in four occasions on Stories, one of them being an account external to the EU, and the rest of them being accounts of the analyzed institutions. Finally, there are three links which do not fit within the proposed categories (two in regular posts and one in Stories). Out of these three links, two are links for downloading an application and one is a UN page.

The possibilities of including links to external sites on Instagram allow European institutions to integrate different platforms and web pages in their communication strategy (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 7). Although other social media platforms do not seem to be especially integrated on the Instagram content of the EP and the EC, EU institutional webpages, on the other hand, often appear in the content to provide additional information. In the case of Stories, links seem to be used mostly to promote regular posts published by the institutions themselves on Instagram.

5.3.2. Similarity between posts and Stories

There are two main types of visual content on Instagram: regular posts and Stories. The characteristics of each of them have been further explored in the methodology chapter of this thesis. Overall, Stories offer more possibilities in terms of interactivity with users, although their impact may be reduced by the ephemerality of the feature, since content disappears after 24 hours of its publication. On the other hand, regular posts offer more possibilities to edit and add textual information to images and videos, but less interactive features.

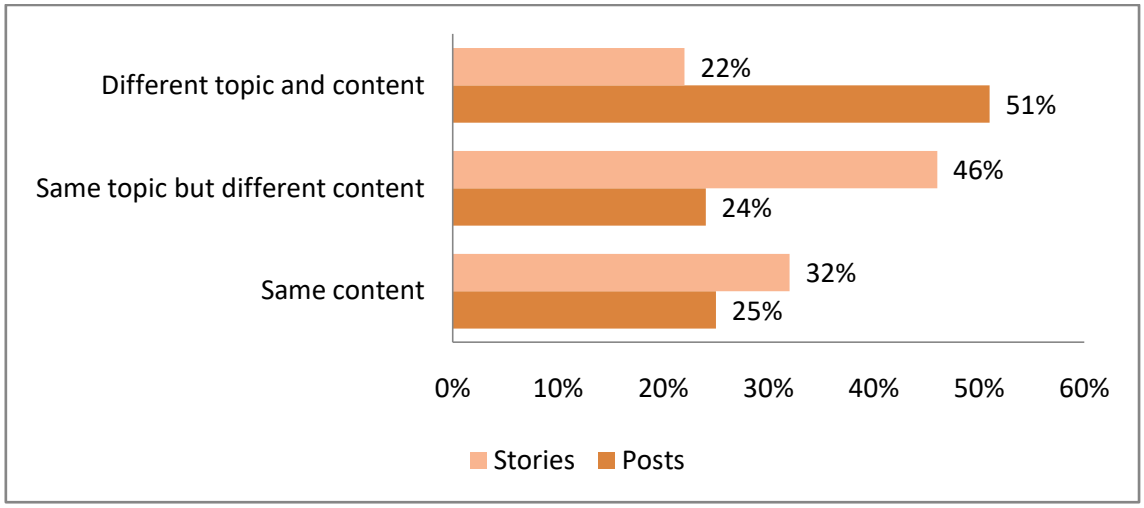

Figure 7. **Similarity between posts and Stories (total)**

Similarities and differences between the content have been analyzed from the perspectives of posts and Stories respectively. Content published as regular posts tends to be more distinct in relation with content posted on the Stories feature. In particular, 57 posts (51%) are totally different in terms of content and topic from Stories, while 28 units (25%) consist of very similar content and 26 (24%) include the same topic but different content. On the other hand, content published in Stories tends to be more similar to content in regular posts. Only 58 Stories (22%) are completely different from posts, while 120 units (46%) have a similar topic but different content and 83 (32%) have exactly the same or very similar content.

These percentages indicate that Stories may be used by European institutions mostly as a way to promote or complement content published on regular posts, since the analyzed units that appear in Stories tend to reflect content posted in the profiles of the EP and the EC, rather than the other way around. Moreover, the findings go hand in hand with the results about the use of links in the Stories function, according to which Stories tend to include links to regular posts in the profile of the institutions. Regular posts do not reflect content in Stories to the same extent, and actually include more different topics, therefore indicating less dependency from the Stories function.

5.4. Interactivity

5.4.1. Interactive elements

In his article about how the European Parliament portrays itself on social media in the Latvian context, Gaušis emphasizes that social media serve as platforms where EU institutions can reach European citizens independently of their geographical location and directly, without the need of using traditional media as an intermediary. Gaušis considers that interactive features of social media, for example the possibility to "like" and comment pictures or to create and answer surveys, among other aspects, are crucial to make direct communication between political actors and citizens possible. Those are relevant features that European institutions can use to communicate efficiently with citizens, and more specifically with young people, since this is the most active population group on social media (Gaušis, 2017: 30).

However, in the context of Instagram, it seems that interactive possibilities available in the Stories feature are not a central part of the communication strategy of European institutions. Only 36 units (14%) include interactive elements, while the vast majority, 225 units (86%), does not. That lack of interactive possibilities appears to be in accordance with previous research about European institutions on social media, which identify top-down and one-to-many communication strategies as predominant (Gaušis, 2017: 37; Leston-Bandeira, 2013: 9-10; Marino and Lo Presti, 2018: 56; Krzyżanowski, 2018: 16). Furthermore, the lack of interactivity also goes hand in hand with the findings of this analysis about the main purpose of the content, which have pointed out the fact that broadcasting is more common than mobilization. Although citizen interaction has not been regarded in this thesis, since the focus of the analysis is exclusively on the content published by EU institutions, it would also be an interesting aspect to assess in future.

The interactive possibilities that Instagram offers include ratings, questions and polls. All of them appear in Stories published by both the EP and the EC: ratings have been added in 15 occasions, while polls appear 11 times and questions have been inserted in 10 units. Moreover, European institutions seem to use interactive elements for different purposes. The most common one is allowing users to express their opinion about a certain subject (22 units). Interactive elements are also used to test users' knowledge in six

occasions and to ask information about citizens in one occasion. Only in six units there is actual democratic deliberation with citizens.

5.4.2. Engagement in democratic deliberation with citizens

As stated in the above section, the level of democratic engagement with citizens of the EP and the EC is very low in the analyzed content. In the case of regular posts, there is no unit in which institutions explicitly promote democratic deliberation with citizens. Although political deliberation may appear on the comments, comments are not part of the scope of this study. In the Stories feature, there are eight units (3%) in which European institutions offer the possibility to engage in democratic deliberation. They do so by allowing users to ask questions about certain issues directly to members of the Parliament and the Commission, who later answer them through live retransmissions on Instagram. For example, in the unit S12, published by the European Parliament, the institution announces the live retransmission of an interview with Greens/EFA co-chairs the following day, and includes the question feature with the purpose of encouraging users to ask questions to the representatives. However, it should be noted that the great majority of analyzed Stories (97%) do not include any type of democratic deliberation.

Figure 8. **Example of engagement in democratic deliberation with citizens (unit S12 – European Parliament)**

These results go hand in hand with findings of previous research about political institutions on social media. The analyses conducted by Karantzeni and Gouscos, Marino and Lo Presti and Krzyżanowski on EU institutional accounts on other social media platforms, mainly Twitter, all point out at the predominance of a one-directional and "formalistic" communication approach. According to the results of these studies, the social media strategy of the EU revolves around self-presentation and advertising, instead of providing citizens with opportunities to become more involved in political processes of

the institutions (Karantzeni and Gouscos, 2013; Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2018). Similarly, the results of this analysis also suggest that the EP and the EC use Instagram mainly as a platform to promote the institutions, rather than providing citizens with possibilities to become more involved in the processes of the EU.

6. Discussion and concluding remarks

6.1. Key findings

This thesis has shed some light on the use of Instagram by European institutions for political communication purposes. In this section, the results of the analysis will be discussed in relation with the research questions, in order to present the most relevant findings.

> *1. In which ways do European political institutions use Instagram to communicate with citizens and how do they portray themselves on the platform?*

In general, the results of the analysis indicate that the European Parliament and the European Commission use Instagram in a rather one-directional way, in accordance with previous research about European institutions on social media. Most of the content has an informative or broadcasting function. In content that has a mobilization purpose, the upcoming EU elections are a recurring theme: the institutions do not only intend to persuade citizens to vote, but also for them to encourage other people to vote. This use of mobilizing content may be related with the low participation in European elections, especially in the last years: during the 2009 and 2014 elections, the voter turnout was below 43%, the lowest percentage in the history of the EU (European Parliament, 2014).

The building of a European identity is also a central element of the communication strategy of the EC and the EP on Instagram. In the analyzed content, the institutions constantly portray aspects of European identity (such as the Euro or the flag) in a positive manner and make reference to European values. As Karantzeni and Gouscos stated, European citizenship is not based on cultural unity but rather on civic values (2013:

479-480). Therefore, creating a sense of European identity and unity on social media may help institutions appear closer to citizens and portray a more positive image of themselves. In some occasions, content is accompanied with explicit reference to users, which may also be considered as a way to make citizens feel more included in the European community.

Personalization appears frequently in the analyzed images and videos; however, institutions do not make much use of other related trends in political communication, such as celebritization and privatization. This may be due to the fact that these trends are usually part of the communication strategies of individual political actors and political parties who have to be in a constant campaign mode, rather than democratic institutions. On the other hand, personalization allows citizens to feel more identified with the people portrayed in the images. The EU is often criticized for its lack of transparency and for being undemocratic (Bellamy, 2008: 29-30), therefore featuring "common citizens" and giving voice to them may help institutions appear more transparent and closer to people.

Moreover, the technical features of social media and mobile devices facilitate sharing content in any moment and in any location (Russmann and Svensson, 2016: 4). European institutions take advantage of these possibilities to share content aside from their official agenda, and occasionally publish snapshots which make their image seem more casual, rather than staged and professional. Providing extra-official and informal content may also enhance the image of approachability and transparency that European institutions seem to be willing to portray on Instagram. However, it should be noted that a relevant portion of the content includes illustrations and animations, from which the perception and context cannot be analyzed.

On Instagram, and social media in general, institutions have more control over their image: they can decide which content they want to publish in order to reflect the values they wish to portray. Most of the political functions that Schill defines regarding visual content (2012: 122) are clearly present, at least to some extent, in the Instagram communication of European institutions. Some of the images and videos serve as arguments about their values; for example, the content both institutions posted about the Holocaust Remembrance Day clearly enhances the values of tolerance and unity against anti-Semitism. Visual symbols may also have an agenda setting function; for instance, in some occasions, the EP published content about self-driving cars with a clear intention

of promoting their use. Finally, pictures and videos may also be used to create identification, as in the case of the photography contest *I am Europe* organized by the EP, in which users are asked to portray common European citizens. These are only a few examples about different functions found in the analyzed units, but they give an idea about which types of visual content the institutions publish on Instagram. Indeed, political purposes are clearly identifiable in most of the content.

2. What are the differences, in terms of content, between the use of the Stories function and the regular posts?

Overall, similar topics are identifiable when comparing regular posts with Stories published by the Parliament and the Commission on their Instagram accounts. According to the results, it is more common for posts to include content about topics which do not appear in Stories, than the other way around. Therefore, Stories tend to reflect the content in posts, implying that institutions may use this feature to promote or complement information presented in regular posts. On the other hand, regular posts include more diverse topics, which indicates less dependency from the Stories function. This situation may be explained due to the fact that messages on Stories are ephemeral and disappear after 24 hours of their publication, so the content may have less impact on users and, for that reason, the analyzed institutions do not want to present too many different topics on the feature.

Specifically looking at the topics of the content that the EP and the EC share on their Instagram profiles, legislation and citizen rights is the most recurrent theme in both regular posts and Stories. However, this topic is clearly much more predominant in regular posts, while topics are more evenly distributed in the Stories function. Issues about member states and European values are also quite common in regular posts; both of these categories relatively relevant in Stories as well, together with informative content about the EU and the institutions.

Regarding the purpose of the content, the main findings of the analysis indicate that Stories tend to include slightly more mobilization than regular posts; however in Stories there is also slightly less explicit reference to users and less promotion of European values. When focusing on how European institutions manage their image, there are also some noticeable differences in both features. Videos are more predominant in Stories, while still images and pictures are more frequently used in regular posts. Hashtags are

also more common in regular posts than in Stories, since they allow tracking posts but not Stories. On the other hand, content tends to be more personalized in Stories. Links are used equally in both Stories and regular posts, and seem to be a relatively important element in the communication strategy of the EP and the EC on Instagram. However, Stories tend to include more links to the Instagram profiles of the analyzed institutions, while the links in regular posts mostly redirect to EU institutional pages. These findings support the argument that European institutions use the Stories function mainly to complement regular posts.

Finally, a key aspect that differentiates the Stories feature from regular posts is the fact that Stories include more interactivity with users, with possibilities to add questions, ratings and polls to the content. However, although the EP and the EC make occasional use of those features, the data suggests that interactive features are not a regular part of their Instagram communication. As previous research has suggested (Gaušis, 2017; Leston-Bandeira, 2013; Marino and Lo Presti; 2018, Krzyżanowski; 2018), the social media communication strategy of European institutions is still rather based on top-down communication processes, disregarding opportunities to interact directly with citizens.

3. How do the interactive features of Instagram affect the institutions' democratic deliberation with users?

The results indicate that democratic deliberation of the EP and the EC with citizens is minimal on Instagram. Instead, the social media platform serves rather as an advertising platform for European institutions; although interactivity occasionally appears in the content, interactive features are not commonly used, and even less frequently with deliberative purposes. The few examples of democratic deliberation with users are Stories in which the EP and the EC allow citizens to ask questions directly to members of the institutions, that are later answered through live retransmissions on Instagram. However, none of these interviews are presented in regular posts.

These results are not surprising, since previous analyses about the communication strategies of European institutions on social media platforms reached similar conclusions, suggesting that the EP and the EC use Instagram mainly as a platform to promote the institutions, rather than to provide citizens with possibilities to become more involved in the political processes of the EU. In a report published by the EC, the institution stated that the hierarchal structure of public institutions often clashes with the network struc-

ture of social media platforms (European Commission, 2013: 11), which may be one of the challenges of European institutions to adapt to the platforms.

In conclusion, European institutions do not exploit the interactive possibilities of Instagram to establish more democratic deliberation with citizens. Nonetheless, it should be noted that social media platforms, including Instagram, are owned by large corporations with economic interests that do not necessarily promote democratic values. Therefore, in order to be noticed, institutions have to adapt their discourse to the characteristics of those platforms, which in turn decide the technological infrastructure, economic model and ideological orientation of the online ecosystem, and decide the ways in which platforms, institutions and users interact with each other (Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, 2018: 32).

6.2. Significance and contributions of the research

This thesis has contributed to the understanding of social media use by democratic institutions of the EU, especially regarding their visual self-presentation and interaction with citizens. The main findings of the analysis suggest that, rather than using the platform as a way to engage into democratic deliberation with citizens, European institutions use Instagram to advertise their policies and promote European values. Moreover, these results are similar to the findings of previous research that has analyzed how European institutions use social media (Gaušis, 2017; Leston-Bandeira, 2013; Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2018), therefore indicating that democratic deliberation with citizens is nowadays not a central part of the communication strategy of the EU.

In 2006, Habermas stated that the fact that mass media focuses on economic profits, promoting content based on entertainment and marketing logic instead of democratic values, is one of the main issues that prevents the existence of a public sphere (2006: 421-422). Although this statement refers to traditional mass media, it is clearly applicable to the context of social media. The findings of the analysis suggest that the European Parliament and the European Commission publish visual content on Instagram to present the institutions in a positive manner and promote European values, rather than to encourage relevant political discussion with citizens. They do so, for example, by encouraging user identification through personalization and explicit reference to users.

Social media platforms are owned by just a few US based corporations that dominate the online space (such as Facebook in the case of Instagram), which promote economic and corporate values above democratic ones. In this context, the popularity of social networks forces political and governmental actors to adapt their online discourse and build their image according to the characteristics of the existing platforms (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 15). This is especially relevant in the European context, since the public values promoted by EU institutions often come in conflict with the corporate values of social networks (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 139). Moreover, although in the past democratic institutions had their own ethical criteria, professional routines and formal procedures to shape their communication strategy, social media platforms challenge those procedures by means of commodification and selection techniques (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 47). In order to be noticed on Instagram and in order to improve their legitimacy, European institutions have had to readjust the way they present their values, prioritizing advertisement techniques over democratic deliberation with citizens.

In the case of this analysis, therefore, Instagram represents a public space in the sense that it facilitates direct interaction between institutions and civil society; however, it cannot constitute a public sphere, because even if the analyzed institutions make use of the interactive possibilities of the social network to communicate with citizens, most interactions do not allow engagement in democratic deliberation (Papacharissi, 2002: 11). The limitations of social media regarding the possibilities it entails for becoming a public sphere should be considered, since interactions and communication on social media platforms are still very much shaped by the economic interests of the corporations that own them (Dahlgren, 2005: 151-152).

Tedesco (2004: 510) claimed that online platforms are an appealing communication channel for political actors because they can present themselves directly in a much cheaper and unlimited space than advertisements. However, by applying the broadcasting model based on economic profits to social media, political actors and institutions merely contribute to the increasing “public cynicism”, instead of achieving further political engagement of citizens (Tedesco, 2004: 516). Moreover, the characteristics of social media platforms, specifically anonymity and the fragmentation of the public, foster a lack of accountability and the creation of “filter bubbles” making it easier to manipulate the public opinion, for example, through spreading fake news. Together with the lack of transparency of the companies that own social media platforms regarding their

data and governance model, this situation is increasing citizen demobilization and undermining democratic values and democratic deliberation (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999: 248; Van Dijck et al. 2018: 143-145).

However, although Instagram, and social media in general, nowadays do not constitute a public sphere due to the limitations of the corporate powers that control them, they have the potential to become one (Fuchs, 2014: 89). One of the central aspects of social media platforms is interactivity, which makes possible direct communication between political institutions and citizens and erases the "hierarchal distances" that exist between them. Social networks also facilitate the circulation of information and political deliberation, similarly to mass media. However, unlike television and press, in which opportunities for political participation are rather limited, social media platforms also offer more possibilities to participate in political processes (Storsul, 2014: 19). Moreover, they also allow bringing political discussion out of the national context, something especially relevant in the case of European institutions (Castells, 2008: 81). Focusing on Instagram, the analyzed content has proven that the platform can be used by European institutions as a tool to promote democratic deliberation with citizens: in a few occasions, the institutions used interactive features to allow citizens to ask questions about relevant topics directly to members of the institutions. Since European institutions are increasingly reliant on social networks, therefore, they should put democratic values as a central aspect of their communication strategy and consider how those platforms can be used to further enhance democracy (Van Dijck et al. 2018: 146).

6.3. Limitations of the study

Even though this thesis offers valuable insights in the use of Instagram by European institutions, it also has various limitations which should be addressed. One of the main limitations is the fact that qualitative research is much affected by subjectivity (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1278). Although the processes of data collection and data analysis have been explained in detail, and the categories for analysis have been defined as exclusively as possible, subjectivity cannot be completely avoided, especially since content analysis and thematic analysis always require a personal interpretation of the data to some extent.

Another of the limitations of content analysis is that although messages may have different meanings, this method only allows analyzing a few of them through the categorization of data. This is even more relevant when exploring visual and audiovisual content, as in the case of this study, since there may be many implicit meanings in pictures and videos which have remained unappreciated in the analysis process.

Finally, the scope of this research is quite limited and the findings presented cannot be generalized. A broader span of time analyzing the Instagram accounts of the European institutions may have been necessary in order to obtain results that could be applied more generally. However, analyzing content on Instagram is quite challenging, due to the lack of data collection tools available. The difficulties are even bigger when analyzing Stories, since content disappears after 24 hours of its publication, and therefore, this situation requires being able to collect the data on a daily basis. Another reason why results cannot be generalized is because the sampling of this study is purposive, therefore findings cannot be "extrapolated from the sample to the population" (White and Marsh, 2006: 37). Nonetheless, this thesis still provides a relevant case study about an understudied topic, as is the visual self-presentation of European institutions on social media.

6.4. Implications for further research

The current research has focused exclusively on analyzing visual and audiovisual content published by European institutions on Instagram. However, other relevant aspects of Instagram communication have remained unanalyzed, such as user comments and live retransmissions. In further research about EU institutional communication on Instagram, it would be interesting to explore how users connect with the institutions, for example through the comments section in regular posts, in order to get a better understanding of the interaction between institutions and users. Another interesting feature of Instagram is the possibility to broadcast live retransmissions, which include a live chat for users. Indeed, during the period of data collection the EC and the EP made use of this feature, for example to interview members of the institutions, allowing users to ask questions directly to them. Although the use of live retransmissions has remained unanalyzed in this thesis, it is an interesting feature in terms of enhancing democratic deliberation with users.

On the other hand, comparative research relating the use of Instagram with other social media platforms would also be relevant to further explore how European institutions are making use of social networks. In Highfield and Leaver's words, "to study social media is not just to study users and networks, content, information, and interactions: it is to study the platforms and their contexts, their affordances and changes, including with relation to other social media platforms" (2016: 9). For example, relevant questions that would help understand the cross-media strategy of European institutions as a whole include the following: Are institutions using different social media platforms for similar purposes or does each platform have a unique purpose? Are they publishing the same content on different social media channels or is the content adapted to each platform? Does interaction with users unfold in similar ways across different platforms?

Finally, although this thesis focuses solely on the self-presentation of European institutions on social media, in future research it would be interesting to assess their own communication in relation with the image of the EU and the institutions presented in mass media, in order to contextualize their social media strategy and get a wider picture of the self-presentation of EU institutions online.

7. References

Anderson, M. and Jiang, J. (2018). *Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018*. Pew Research Center. [pdf]. Available at: http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/

Balmas, M. and Sheafer, T. (2013).Leaders First, Countries After: Mediated Political Personalization in the International Arena. *Journal of Communication*, 63(3), pp. 454–475. Available at: https://doi-org.libproxy.helsinki.fi/10.1111/jcom.12027

Bellamy, R. (2008). Evaluating Union citizenship: belonging, rights and participation within the EU. *Citizenship Studies*, 12(6), pp. 597–611. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1519910

Bennett, L. W. (2012). The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), pp. 20-39. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212451428

Castells, M. (2008). The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), pp. 78-93. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311877

Criado, J.I.; Sandoval-Almazan, R. and Gil-Garcia, R. (2013). Government innovation through social media. *Government Information Quarterly*, 30(4), pp. 319-326. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2013.10.003

Dahlberg, L. (2001). The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere. *Information, Communication & Society*, 4(4), pp. 615-633. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180110097030

Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation. *Political Communication*, 22(2), pp 147-162. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600590933160

Domke, D.; Perlmutter, D. and Spratt, M. (2002). The primes of our times? An examination of the 'power' of visual images. *Journalism*, 3(2), pp. 131-159. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/146488490200300211

Ekman, M. and Widholm, A. (2014). Twitter and the celebritisation of politics. *Celebrity Studies*, 5(4), pp. 518-520. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2014.981038

Eldin, A. K. (2016). Instagram Role In Influencing Youth Opinion In 2015 Election Campaign In Bahrain. *European Scientific Journal*, 12(2), pp. 245-257. Available at: http://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/view/6935

European Commission (2013). *Assessing the benefits of social networks for organizations*. [pdf]. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/432369c3-9c0b-477d-8576-c1cb800960e9/language-en/format-PDF/source-80303278 (accessed 05/04/2019)

European Parliament (2014). *Results of the 2014 European elections: turnout*. [online]. Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html (accessed 02/05/2019)

European Union (2018). *Social networks*. [online]. Available at: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact/social-networks_en (accessed 14/11/2018)

Eurostat. (2018). *Youth in the digital world* database. [online]. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/youth/data/database (accessed 20/11/2018)

Filimonov, K.; Russmann, U. and Svensson J. (2016). Picturing the Party: Instagram and Party Campaigning in the 2014 Swedish Elections. *Social Media + Society*, 2(3), pp. 1-11. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116662179

Fuchs, C. (2014). Social Media and the Public Sphere. *TripleC*, 12(1), pp. 57-101. Available at: https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v12i1.552

Fuchs, C.; Boersma, K.; Albrechtslund, A. and Sandoval, M. (2012). *Internet and Surveillance. The Challenges of Web 2.0 and Social Media*. New York: Routledge.

Gaušis, E. (2017). European institutions on social media – shaping the notion of European citizenship. *Economics and Business*, 30(1), pp. 27–39. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1515/eb-2017-0003

Glantz, M. (2013). Instagram. In Harvey, K. [ed.], *Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics* (pp. 694–696). Los Angeles: SAGE.

Gurevitch, M.; Coleman, S. and Blumler, J.G. (2009). Political Communication —Old and New Media Relationships. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 625(1), pp. 164-181. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209339345

Habermas, J. (1994). Three Normative Models of Democracy. *Constellations*, 1(1), pp. 1-10. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8675.1994.tb00001.x

Habermas, J. (2006). Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research. *Communication Theory*, 16(4), pp. 411–426. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x

Highfield, T. and Leaver, T. (2016). Instagrammatics and digital methods: Studying visual social media, from selfies and GIFs to memes and emoji. *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(1), pp. 47-62. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1155332

Holiday, S.; Lewis, M.J. and LaBaugh, J.L. (2015). Are you talking to me? The socio-political visual rhetoric of the Syrian Presidency's Instagram account. *The Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 30(2), pp. 1-27.

Hsieh, H. and Shannon, S. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), pp. 1277-1288. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687

Instagram (2018). *Data Policy* [online]. Available at: https://help.instagram.com/519522125107875/?helpref=hc_fnav&bc[0]=368390626577968&bc[1]=285881641526716 (accessed 14/02/2019)

Instagram (2019). *Guide to get started with Instagram for Business* [online]. Available at: https://business.instagram.com/getting-started (accessed 06/04/2019)

Instagram Info Center (2018). *Our Story* [online]. Available at: https://instagram-press.com/our-story/ (accessed 12/11/2018)

Karantzeni, D. and Gouscos, D. (2013). eParticipation in the EU: Re-focusing on social media and young citizens for reinforcing European identity. *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy*, 7(4), pp.477-500. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/TG-01-2013-0003

Klinger U. and Svensson J. (2014). The emergence of network media logic in political communication: A theoretical approach. *New Media & Society*, 17(8), pp. 1241-1257. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814522952

Krippendorf, K. (2004). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodologies*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Krzyżanowski, M. (2018). Social media in/and the politics of the European Union: Polito-organizational communication, institutional cultures, and self-inflicted elitism. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 17(2), pp. 281–304. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.18001.krz

Lalancette, M. and Raynauld, V. (2017). The Power of Political Image: Justin Trudeau, Instagram, and Celebrity Politics. *American Behavioral Scientist*, pp. 1–37. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217744838

Lee Kaid, L. [ed.] (2004). *Handbook of Political Communication Research*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Leston-Bandeira, C. and Bender, D. (2013). How deeply are parliaments engaging on social media? *Information Polity*, 18(4), pp. 281-297. Available at: http://doi.org/10.3233/IP-130316

Liebhart, K. and Bernhardt, P. (2017). Political Storytelling on Instagram: Key Aspects of Alexander Van der Bellen's Successful 2016 Presidential Election Campaign. *Media*

and Communication, 5(4), p. 15-25. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v5i4.1062

Loader, B.D. and Mercea, D. (2011). Networking Democracy? Social media innovations and participatory politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(6), pp. 757-769. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.592648

Loader, B.D.; Vromen, A. and Xenos, M.A. (2016). Performing for the young networked citizen? Celebrity politics, social networking and the political engagement of young people. *Media, Culture & Society*, 38(3), pp. 400-419. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715608261

Marino, V. and Lo Presti, L. (2018). From citizens to partners: the role of social media content in fostering citizen engagement. *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy*, 12(1), pp.39-60. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/TG-07-2017-0041

Markham, A. and Buchanan, E. (2012). *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0).* [pdf]. Association of Internet Researchers. Available at: http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf (accessed 06/04/2019)

Marland, A. (2012). Political photography, journalism and framing in the digital age: The management of visual media by the prime minister of Canada. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 17(2), pp. 214-233. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161211433838

Mazzoleni, G. and Schulz, W. (1999). "Mediatization" of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy? *Political Communication*, 16(3), pp. 247-261. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/105846099198613

Muñoz, C.L., and Towner, T.L. (2017). The image is the message: Instagram marketing and the 2016 presidential primary season. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 16(3-4), pp. 290-318. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2017.1334254

Nowell, L.S.; Norris, J.M.; White, D.E. and Moules, N.J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), pp. 1-13. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Pal J. and Gonawela, A. (2017). Studying political communication on Twitter: the case for small data. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 18, pp. 97-102. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2017.09.009

Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The virtual sphere: the Internet as a public sphere. *New Media & Society*, 4(1), pp. 9-27. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/14614440222226244

Papacharissi, Z. (2008). The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere and beyond. In: A. Chadwick, P.N. Howardeds. (2008). *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, London: Routledge. Ch. 17.

Persily, N. (2017). The 2016 U.S. Election: Can Democracy Survive the Internet? *Journal of Democracy*, 28(2), pp. 63-76. Available at: https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/can-democracy-survive-the-internet

Price, R. (2018). Instagram's Stories feature is now twice as big as Snapchat, with 400 million daily users. *Business Insider*, [online] 28 June. Available at: https://www.businessinsider.com/instagram-stories-400-million-daily-active-users-snapchat-2018-6?r=US&IR=T&IR=T (accessed 24/10/2018)

Ritcher, F. (2018). Instagram, Not Snapchat, Is the Social Platform of the Hour. *Statista*, [online] 10 August. Available at: https://www.statista.com/chart/15034/worldwide-user-growth-of-instagram-and-snapchat/ (accessed 06/04/2019)

Russmann, U. and Svensson, J. (2017). Introduction to Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges. *Media and Communication*, 5(4), pp. 1–5. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v5i4.1263

Russmann, U. and Svensson, J. (2016). Studying Organizations on Instagram. *Information*, 7(4), pp. 1-12. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/info7040058

Schill, D. (2012). The visual image and the political image: A review of visual communication research in the field of political communication. *Review of Communication*, 12(2), pp. 118-142. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.653504

Shirky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change. *Foreign Affairs*, 90(1), pp. 28-41. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25800379

Smith, A. and Anderson, M. (2018). *Social Media Use in 2018*. Pew Research Center. [pdf]. Available at: http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/ (accessed 06/04/2019)

Storsul, T. (2014). Deliberation or Self-presentation? Young People, Politics and Social Media. *Nordicom Review*, 35(2) pp. 17-28. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2014-0012

Tucker, J.A; Roberts, M.E.; Barberá, P. and Theocharis, Y. (2017). From liberation to turmoil: Social media and democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(4), pp. 46-59. Available at: https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/liberation-turmoil-social-media-and-democracy

Van Dijck, J. and Poell, T. (2013). Understanding Social Media Logic. *Media and Communication*, 1(1), pp. 2-14. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v1i1.70

Van Dijck, J.; Poell T. and de Waal, M. (2018). *The Platform Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Vesnic-Alujevic, L. (2013). *Members of the European Parliament online: The use of social media in political marketing*. [pdf]. Cente for European Studies. Available at: https://martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/political-marketing-and-social-media.pdf (accessed 06/04/2019)

White, M.D. and Marsh, E.E. (2006). Content Analysis: A Flexible Methodology. *Library Trends*, 55(1), pp. 22-45. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/2142/3670